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This Is the Best I Can Do

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This Is the Best I Can Do

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partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree
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Abstract

“This Is the Best I Can Do” is a collection of short stories and poems that explores the psychology of lost ideals. The characters in these stories hold convictions about how the world is and how people should be that are altered when they are placed in situations that prove reality is far more complex. With shaken faith comes the necessity of building a new understanding not only of the world around them as a whole but of their own lives and identities. These revisions are not necessarily improvements, but they are necessary. Whether the faith is in a deity, a philosophy, or a person, the works contained here seek to find out what happens to a person when his or her foundation crumbles.

Everything's an Apple

When my mother was a very little girl, her father owned a store called Everything's an Apple. And everything he sold was an apple, lined up neatly on wooden shelves like books or handicrafts. Each apple could be viewed and purchased individually. Of course these weren't your regular galas or Granny Smiths that can be stored in barrels and sold by the bag. The apples in my grandfather's store were special, the finest and strangest apples in the country.

This was back in the '20s, when people had money but weren't good at managing it. They were a different kind of frivolous back then, spending money like it was a new and exciting hobby, and my grandfather benefitted from their novel ability to buy one fancy apple over a bag of regular ones just because the one apple was more expensive.

But my grandfather didn't make his living through such lazy methods as adding a coat of wax and raising the price. His customers wanted something special, and he took pride in providing just that. He sold gilded apples, hollow apples, apples that were cut apart and fixed back together to look like some kind of Picasso still life. There were apples with images carved in the peel, and others that were made entirely of peel. He sold patent leather apples imported from Italy and ice chunk apples from Siberia, welded steel apples from the mills of Pennsylvania, heavy with rivets and heavy in general.

Some apples were absolutely one of a kind. One apple, my mother tells me, had been grown underground without light. It was dark and shadowy, like a black and white photo, and the woman who ate it never smiled again.

Another apple was constantly on fire. My mother can't tell me how, claims her father didn't know either, but she says the apple burned and burned and was never consumed. It was also never bought, because no one wanted an apple that was on fire, and so it was displayed on a pillar in the center of the store, blazing like the immaculate heart of Eve.

I was also told that one apple in the store had been exposed to 1,039 pornographic images, but my mother was a child so she wasn't allowed to see it.

My grandfather's business really took off in 1925, when he made a deal with some mafia moonshiners and started filling apples with the liquor. He kept these liquor apples hidden in a secret compartment in the wall at the back of his shop. When he did that, my mother was no longer allowed inside. Of course this was during Prohibition, and there was a danger in selling booze. So my grandfather bought some apples that were also guns, and he stored them behind the counter.

One day a man walked into the store and gave the signal that he wanted to buy a moonshine apple. My grandfather felt like there was something fishy about the guy, so he slipped one of the apple guns into his pocket and went to open the secret compartment. As he was opening it, he heard a strange noise. He pulled the apple gun from his pocket and turned around, only to see the man eating one of the rarest apples in my grandfather's collection, the Apple of Forgetting. There had been only three known to exist in the world, and one was going quickly down the strange man's gullet.

My grandfather lowered his apple gun, more worried about the effect the apple would have on the man than the fact that he was being robbed. The man did not pause in his eating until the apple was down to its core, at which point he froze, dropped the core, and stood stock still for three solid days. My grandfather had three strong men try to move the petrified thief, but he was grounded to the floor. Customers were forced to walk around him. They complained to my grandfather, 'Can't you move this man?' But it couldn't be done, so my grandfather said, 'Thank you for your suggestion.'

At the end of the third day, the man snapped back to life; though, as one would expect from the apple's name, he had lost his memory. It was odd, but the man didn't seem too worried about it, just stretched and apologized to the gaping customers for being in their way. Odder, when the man let my grandfather search his wallet, all of the man's identification cards were wiped as blank as his mind. The only clue, if you can call it that, to his life before eating the apple was perhaps the oddest thing of all: a rolled up sliver of paper tucked in his front pocket, reading in sloppy red ink: *This is the best I can do.*

As a child, when my mother told me this story, I'd wonder what kind of life a man could lead that would make erasing himself the best option. I had trouble believing that it wasn't selfish, extreme, that there wasn't some other way.

Now, I'm older, and I've seen a range of sins that even good people can be backed into. There are little things I've done that will haunt me until the end of my days, and sometimes, I dream of reaching for that apple.

Monsters

Tara's mind rushes up and away, like a camera on a crane pulling back to film a scene too gruesome to show close up. She tenses, eyes closed, thankful for the nighttime dark as she pulls away from him and sits up straight, crossing her arms tightly over her bare chest. She tries to breathe normally, but her lungs constrict and her inhale is like a mix between an asthma attack and a sob. She regrets not going straight home, where she'd be in bed and peaceful instead of hyperventilating naked in a car.

"Sorry!" she gasps, her head shaking a frantic 'no,' her palms pressing into her eyes. "Shit. Fuck. I'm sorry."

His arm is around her now, squeezing, and she tells herself to be comforted despite his clammy skin and the sour smell of his body. His armpit hair wetly grazes her shoulder.

"If I didn't know better, I'd think those were orgasms," he says.

"They're not," she says and buries her face in her arms, exhausted from her fourth panic attack of the night and needing to be alone, if just in her mind, if just for a moment. It's the second time she's given Nick a ride home from O'Reilly's, the restaurant where they both work, and the second time he's tried to fuck her in the back seat of her car. The first time, it failed to go further than a sloppy, aborted hand-job which he completed while she stared defeatedly out the car window. She doubts she'll do any better tonight.

"Are you crying?" he asks, incredulous, as though her crying would be the most ridiculous part of two adults with homes making out at 2 am behind a Target.

"No. I'm fine." Her voice is clear, but she doesn't look up. She wishes she were crying.

"Hey, come here." He pulls her closer to him, pressing her head to his chest. She tries not to think about his sweat soaking into her hair. "I'm a safe guy. You know that, right?"

"Yeah," she responds, mechanically, like it's an answer she's memorized but doesn't understand. "I know."

Nick had seemed safe, and that was part of the point, part of the reason she'd let her 'I don't knows' and 'maybes' turn into 'sures' and 'I guess sos.' On her first day of work, Nick had been one of the servers assigned to hostess training ('hostess' being Tara's official job title, though her nerves had led to a gradual shift in her duties from seating customers to bussing tables, a change for which she was grateful), and she had appreciated how he was neither attractive nor charming, how non-threatening his undesirability made him seem. Nick was the worst kind of fat, the kind that can't be hidden by well-tailored clothes and certainly not by restaurant uniform polos; the kind of fat that squishes and sags off a body instead of bloating firmly like a balloon under the skin. His face had the deep set eyes and upturned nose of a grotesque cartoon or a creature an untalented child would fashion from clay. These traits were only enhanced by his height (6'4" at least), so that his visage brought to mind a soft, effeminate ogre – a comparison that piqued Tara's sympathy, but also assured her that this was one man who was in no place to criticize any woman's appearance.

It made sense to Tara that she was drawn to Nick over the other guys they worked with, men with sharp smiles who wore sex on their sleeves and an abrasive amount of body spray, who talked loudly about women they'd fucked, or wanted to fuck, or would never fuck, who constantly battled to dominate one another with abusive jokes. She'd watch them talk to the other hostesses and female servers and wonder how these girls weren't afraid, how they could flirt and laugh when Tara – who was almost never the target of her co-workers' flirtatious attacks – imagined every word and action as a calculated test, a search for weaknesses to be noted, mocked, or exploited. Her survival strategy of avoidance was a familiar one, the same she'd used since puberty had first made her redefine what it was to be naked: no longer free and unconstrained, but vulnerable, watched, open to an unwanted barrage of lust or disdain.

And yet, aloof as she could be, Tara couldn't help but feel that she wasn't truly the one doing the rejecting. Sure, she was a little overweight and oddly proportioned, short and hippy with dull brown hair she hid with a severe ponytail, but it really felt like she had a defect, or defects, deeper than her physical flaws (which, if she were honest, she knew she could disguise or manage better, if she wanted to), defects that inherently

excluded her from the sexual battle royale that others participated in with a natural gusto. She knew that by twenty-five she was supposed to have already jumped into the fray.

With Nick, she could at least talk to him without having to assume that the first words out of his mouth might be a question about her pubic hair, for instance, or that as soon as she walked away he might mime her giving head while his buddies laughed. In the month they'd known each other, they'd had a few conversations about books and plays, family issues and religious upbringing (his Catholic, hers fundamentalist), and one night when everyone had stayed for a drink after close, she'd confessed to him in a tipsy half-whisper that she was a virgin.

Over the next week Tara noticed that he went out of his way to talk to her, to make her laugh, and she was tentatively happy that she'd opened up and made a friend. Between O'Reilly's and her day job copy-editing textbooks, she didn't have much time for sleep, not to mention a social life – the few friends who stayed in St. Louis after college had long ago stopped expecting her to show up to things – and it was nice to have a person at work, to have conversations that went past the mundane impersonal discussion of tasks. She was grateful; she'd been alone so long she hadn't even known she was lonely. Then, two days ago, Nick told her that his car had broken down and asked if she could give him a ride home. In the car, after a brief run-down of the night – the rudest customers, the crappy tips, the manager's hair – he turned to her and asked with oddly comforting frankness if she wanted to “make out, or something.”

“Oh, uh, not right now,” she said, feeling immediately stupid. “My breath's really bad.”

He leaned towards her, smiling in a way that made her feel simultaneously suffocated and exposed. “I don't care,” he said. “Come on. When was the last time you got any?”

Tara had sensed that a proposition like this was coming, had the uncertain certainty of a person who notices a slight change in manner, a question in the air. She was a little sad, a little hurt that that's what this was all about. She was also tempted. This was, she thought, what people her age did, what they were supposed to do. Since college she'd felt like a freak for being so inexperienced, but recently she had begun to worry that it would be months or years before sex would even be an option, and then it

would probably end in mortification. More and more she'd have paranoid daydreams about sleeping with someone she really liked only to be scorned for her gross incompetence, or worse, being seen naked and learning that her genitals were deformed but her gyno hadn't told her because the parts were still functional and it's not a doctor's job to tell you that you're ugly.

"Ok," she said and found an out of the way place to park. Nick offered his apartment, but Tara refused, wanting to stay on neutral ground, to avoid even the discussion of spending the night together.

When the first moments of kissing were spit-heavy and uncomfortable, Tara understood that she was not going to enjoy this at all. She wanted to stop, but it was impossible to tell Nick without being obviously insulting, which meant she'd have to wait it out. It was only when he lifted her shirt off and began to touch skin normally protected by clothing that she was flattened by a shock of panic. She'd had panic attacks as a kid over forgotten school assignments or disobeying her parents, but this was a total operation shut-down, like her body was saying 'no' where she would not. When she froze, Nick seemed confused, unsure what to do. He tried to comfort her, but she could hear the annoyance and judgment in his voice. And why shouldn't he be annoyed? He wasn't her boyfriend. He had no reason to care about her well-being, and now what should have been an easy hook-up was becoming a night of taking care of the crazy girl. Even through the panic, Tara's pride forced her to steel herself, determined to go as far as she could without shaking or gagging and regain a little dignity.

Later, when she was dropping him off, Nick had asked for her phone number.

"I'll text you tomorrow. To see how you are," he said. "I like to check in with girls after this sort of thing." As he put her number in his phone, he said, sounding self-conscious but impressed, "I don't even know your last name."

Now, with her breathing approaching normal, he asks if she could try again.

"Just put your hand on it," he begs. "Please."

She moves away from him to the other side of the small backseat, crossing her legs, then barely looking she locates and grasps his half-hard penis. She tries to block out the noises he makes, the flexing, invertebrate way it responds to her hand, to simply

repeat the rapid jerking movement until she's done. Once, Tara glances over to check for a sign that it's almost over. In the watered-down grey light, she sees his skin stretch and flop with each movement of her arm, his pale shapeless thighs, his puckered jostling belly, this grunting human mass of flesh, and she's disgusted yet amazed by how undeniably animal he is, wordless and unhidden by clothes, energy focused solely on the visceral. She turns and stares instead at the headrest in front of her.

As she performs the sex act, she tells herself that it's just an action. She tries to imagine her hand movements as working a machine with a silicone lever, like she's a part of that same machine. Her arm is getting tired and a couple small, lesser-used muscles begin to twinge – a familiar feeling, in a way, similar to working as a barista and shaking nitrous into whipped cream or playing Mario Kart and hitting Z as fast as she can.

“Ow,” he says. “Not so hard.”

“Sorry.” Tara loosens her grip, though secretly she's a little glad she hurt him. For a moment, she imagines squeezing his dick as tightly as she can, crushing the life out of it like a small living thing, a salamander or a mouse, then leaping from the car and scraping her palm on the asphalt to grate off the offending skin.

When he comes, she quickly finds his shirt and wipes her hand on it, then passes it to him so they can dress. Tara throws on clothes with a speed and snappiness that's almost aggressive, yanking her shirt on without her bra. She's out of the car and back in the driver's seat before Nick has a chance to fully pull on his pants.

The first few minutes of the drive are silent, and Tara isn't sure if she's anxious or angry or why she'd be either. The one-sidedness is her doing. One of the initial things that made her panic, besides a drop of his sweat going up her nose, was Nick looming over her and saying, “I want to go down on you.” Tara refused, repeatedly, unable to give reasons but sickened by the thought of his tongue probing her sensitive areas. Later, he attempted to touch between her legs, but she sat silent and still until he asked, “Is this doing anything for you at all?” “No,” she replied, and he stopped trying.

“When do you work again?” Nick asks, breaking the silence.

“Friday night.”

“Cool. I work that night, too.” He turns his body towards her as much as he can in the passenger seat, and she feels his hand playing with her ponytail. “You know,” he says, “when you sent me that text I was afraid we wouldn’t be able to do this again. I’m glad you changed your mind.”

“Yeah.” She winces, remembering the frantic messages she’d sent him that first morning after: *I’m sorry, I don’t want to be a bitch, but last night can’t happen again. You did nothing wrong, I’m just crazy. See you at work. Sorry.* His reply had been brief, *Ok*, which made her feel silly and ashamed for making a big deal out of nothing. At the same time, she’d felt relief that she’d ended it, relief she no longer felt because tonight when he’d asked again, she’d agreed. In the preceding days, she’d questioned if she’d been hasty in her rejection, if maybe her panic had been defensiveness, a mental block that precluded the enjoyment of physical intimacy with anyone. She’d liked him enough to want to be his friend – was she really so uptight and shallow that she couldn’t even give him a chance?

Tara stops in front of his old brick apartment building and waits for him to get out without even putting the car in park. He kisses her and she lets him. When he pulls back, he smiles then tries to playfully honk her boob, but she crosses her arms and turns away.

“See you Friday,” she says.

The next morning Tara wakes up early, before her 7:30 alarm, her heart racing, numb with the realization that whatever is going on between her and Nick, it’s no longer a one-time thing. She lies on her back in bed for a minute, pulling at her hair, and in the semi-dark of her studio apartment she accepts that she can’t brush the second time off with an ‘oops’ or an ‘I had a bad night.’ She worries someone might find out, a friend or coworker, and she’ll have to try to explain what she doesn’t understand herself.

“You’re not just doing this because you feel sorry for me, right?” he’d asked her the first night as they were just getting into it, after Tara had decided she really didn’t want to be there.

“What?”

He’d furrowed his brow, giving her a searching, affronted look. “Because my grandma just died.”

“Oh, no,” she’d said, regret settling in her stomach. “Of course not.” And that was true, more than she’d like to admit; she’d been so caught up in whether or not this was a good idea for her that she’d completely forgotten his loss.

Now Tara rolls out of bed and begins her daily routine: coffee and toast, stretching, shower, teeth, clothes. As she eats, barely tasting, she periodically shakes her head, trying to dislodge flashbacks of the night before, to choke back the jittery revulsion that accompanies them. At some point, Nick will expect her to be physical with him again and she’ll have to say no – probably more than once. This kind of conflict is new to her, and she wishes she could just hide until Nick accepted it was over. The only boyfriend she’s ever had was for a few months in college when she was nineteen. The physical extent of their relationship had been kissing and cuddling, with some occasional above-the-clothes groping that Tara found strange but not unpleasant. Once, near the end, he’d humped her leg a bit, and it had only been the sincere look of need on his face that stopped her from laughing. The boyfriend had been a quiet nerdy guy she’d met in a philosophy elective, and when he’d broken up with her, it had been so easy. Without ceremony, he’d said he didn’t want to see her anymore and dropped off a box of her things, a few books she’d lent him and DVDs they’d watched. She’d been thankful for the lack of confrontation; the split was so simple and impersonal, it felt less like a break up and more like the graduation of an acquaintance that she liked but wouldn’t stay in touch with. The only sting occurred months later when she’d opened one of the DVDs to find porn in her *Love Actually* case.

Tara undresses for her shower, watching herself in the bathroom mirror. Beneath her eyes are sleepless blue rings, and her skin is visibly dull and dry. She’s never been in

great shape, but since she started working two jobs she's gained some weight, lost what tone she had, and she wonders how much she'd have to let herself go before her poochy softness crossed the line into a flabby gut. She rubs her hands over her stomach and grabs at her fat, lightly at first but then harder, bending at the waist to fit more into her hands, then painfully clenching and yanking like she wants to rip her flesh off by the fistful. Fury bubbles and she growls, then releases her grip to slap herself hard on her right cheek, then her left, repeating until the lasting sting feels even on both sides, but it's not enough to calm her, so she balls her hands into defiant fists and beats her chest like she's Tarzan or King Kong - fiercely, as if there were no tenderness.

When she finishes, she takes some deep breaths and sees her stomach mottled, her cheeks pink, her breasts hanging like deflated, useless bags of skin, and she wishes, not for the first time, that she didn't have a body at all. Or if she did, that it could be a non-descript one, without features or genitals that could be better or worse than anyone else's. She bitterly considers what it would take for a body to be safe from criticism or attraction, and ends up envisioning herself as a floating blue orb. If people would just accept her as an orb, she thinks, it wouldn't really matter her diameter or her exact shade of blue, because there would be no right or wrong way to be a blue orb.

Tara arrives at her copy-editing job at 8:45, walking past the empty desks of her co-workers who never arrive even five minutes early. The woman who shares her workspace, Angie, usually rolls in around 9:15, her olive skin glowing from a morning workout that always runs longer than planned, and spends the first half an hour drinking a latte and preparing for her day. Tara likes to get into a reading groove before Angie comes in and distracts her.

This morning, Tara continues proofreading a text book on horse breeding and artificial insemination. She glances over yesterday's work, double-checking the parts on the selection of stallions and the collection and evaluation of semen, with their accompanying illustrations and charts on recommended testicular measurements and scrotal widths, accompanied by not a few photos of horse balls. In one photograph, a

young female veterinarian with thick auburn hair measures a horse's scrotum with a set of calipers. Next Tara reads about the selection of brood mares. For best results, the book says, breeders should use a sweet-tempered but self-confident mare, whose appearance meets breed standards and whose body parts connect at the correct angles.

"Morning!" Angie clunks the oversized tote bag she calls a purse on the desk across from Tara. Her straight ash-brown hair is full-bodied yet tame even in the humidity, and she smiles with what seems like authentic cheerfulness as she throws her things into their designated places: coffee cup and laptop on desk, trainers under it, phone and keys and other miscellany scattered wherever they land.

"Good morning," Tara replies, eyes still on the page though she can't concentrate on the words.

"I talked to Maddy, and we were thinking about trying out that new sandwich shop down the street for lunch – Sprouts, I think? You want to come?"

"Oh, sure."

About once a week, Tara goes to lunch with Maddy and Angie, the only other women in the office under 40. The lunches are enjoyable in a superficial way, the kind of environment where you can only talk about good things. Maddy's and Angie's stories about fun nights out with friends or nephew's birthday parties untarnished by family feuds are far from riveting, even though they have a way of scraping at the lonely rawness in Tara's chest. Some days it's nice to listen to TV show summaries and celebrity break-ups as if her own life was nothing to gawk at.

When Angie's settled in, Tara returns to editing. The textbook authors reassure the horse owner that if the mare doesn't fulfill breed ideals but they wants to breed her anyway, they can, because *'Motivations for breeding vary from sentimental to economic. Not everyone is trying for a champion.'*

Around 11:00 she feels her phone vibrate – twice, indicating a text. It's from Nick.

How are you feeling?

She checks to see if Angie is looking in her direction, but her deskmate is fixated on her computer screen typing furiously – probably on G-chat. Tara responds: *I'm ok. At work.*

His reply is immediate: *That's all you've got? Nothing sexy?*

She stifles an incredulous laugh. In the best circumstances, she can't imagine sending dirty messages, especially not at work. It's mortifying to think of those records existing, of anyone reading them.

Nope, she responds.

Come on. Give me something.

Fine: panic attack, panic attack. I'm sorry!

Lol. There's the sexy Tara I know.

At lunch, she rides with Maddy and Angie to Sprouts, Tara in the backseat while Maddy drives and Angie takes shotgun. Maddy talks excitedly about her boyfriend, Matt, who just got home from Iraq, and as she speaks she turns her curly blonde head away from the road more than Tara would like. Her chatter is hardly interrupted as they park, order sandwiches and salads (all opting for low-cal ingredients), and find a table by the window. Between bites of her turkey breast sub, Maddy tells the other girls about picking Matt up at the airport, about the date he took her on to the fair. Angie asks if she has a picture.

“Oh, I do!” she says, covering her full mouth with her hand. She grins as she digs around in her knitted orange purse. “From yesterday. I’ll show you on my phone.”

Tara picks all of the mandarin oranges from her salad, eating them separately as Maddy finds the picture then with barely contained elation passes her iPhone to Angie, who takes it with an air of anticipation usually reserved for something grander and more

exotic than a picture of a man, something like the Loch Ness monster or a tropical fish once thought extinct.

“Maddy, he is so cute!” Angie gushes, passing the phone to Tara. “Look at those dimples. And his arms! Well done, girl.”

On the screen Tara sees a tall, muscled man with an Army t-shirt and buzzed hair, smiling and hugging Maddy from behind. They’re standing on what looks like a footbridge, and the sky behind them is a purpley evening grey. They look contented, at home, as though their bodies don’t work as well when they’re apart. He seems friendly enough and has proportional features. Still, Tara doesn’t understand the hype.

“Yeah,” she agrees, returning the phone to Maddy. “He’s cute.” She feels like she should say more. “You two look really cute together.”

Returning to her salad, Tara can’t help but think that maybe Angie exaggerated how attractive she found Matt. Maddy’s attraction makes sense, she clearly loves him, but how Angie could find him attractive from a photo alone is beyond her. It’s not that she doesn’t know that some people are more aesthetically pleasing than others, and she felt attraction to her college boyfriend and a couple guys in high school, but at-a-glance assessment has always been beyond her, and to tell the difference between someone who’s average or and someone who’s more, Tara’s always had to follow others’ leads. If compelled to give an opinion, she’d usually play it safe and go by weight and symmetry.

“God, I need to find a man,” groans Angie. She leans back in her chair, dramatically flourishing a forkful of salad. “I’ll be single for five months next Tuesday and it feels like I’m going to explode.” She shoves the salad into her mouth and crunches it. “How about you, Tara? You seeing anyone?”

She forces a smile and a little laugh. “No, I’m in a bit of a dry spell, too,” she says. She imagines showing Maddy and Angie pictures of Nick, regaling them with endearing things he’s done (“And then I was shaking so bad he asked if I’d been molested!”), and she feels like a visitor from a nastier world. “It’s just really hard to meet people these days.”

Angie nods, drinking deeply from her Diet Coke. “So true,” she says, then turns to Maddy. “You hold on to that one.”

On the way back to from the restaurant, Tara checks her phone and sees a text from Nick.

Would you be free before work tomorrow to talk? it reads. Meet at Aspen Park at like 4?

Ok, she replies. See you then.

Friday, Tara meets Nick in the park, only a few minutes from O'Reilly's. The park is small, none of the trees full grown, not a place meant for hiking so much as for picnics and strolls with family or pets. Nick's standing alone under the sparse shade, looking lumpy and out of place next to the slim young trees. She's always seen him at night or in the dim light of O'Reilly's, and he looks unnatural in full sunshine, like he's a gargoyle or some cave-dwelling thing whose unfortunate phizog should never be seen by light of day. She wonders guiltily how often other people see him and think the same thing.

They smile a hello before Tara stalks off, setting a brisk pace despite the 90 degree July heat. They walk in relative quiet for a few minutes and Tara concentrates on the sun absorbing into her skin, the heavy silent breeze that barely cools, and she's pleased to enjoy a rare moment outside. Soon though, Nick stops at a picnic table and sits on top of it, his breath heavy and audible. Tara joins him, not sitting too close. Nick has already sweated through his grey t-shirt.

“So what's wrong?” he asks. Large droplets of perspiration dot his forehead, which wrinkles in an expression of concern and a couple drops join together and slide towards his nose. “When you left Wednesday night you seemed upset.”

Tara stares away from him into a larger patch of woods. The maple trees look warm and wholesome with rugged bark, the leaves brilliant with sun, and she wishes she

were alone and less worn out so she could run freely through the undergrowth, jumping fallen branches and filling her lungs with deep plant smell like she did when she was a little girl, when she didn't have to worry about working two dumb jobs or explaining to men why she didn't enjoy touching them.

"I was," she says, then grapples for the right words, words that will express her qualms but not offend. "I just... I hate freaking out and I don't know how to stop it."

"Is it something I'm doing?"

"No. No, I think I'd be this way with anyone." She doesn't know if this is true, only having the one data point, but she errs on the side of being kind. "It's my problem."

"Are you sure? It seems like you wouldn't panic like that if you trusted me. I'm not going to hurt you, you know."

"I know. It's not that. I don't know what it is."

"You know what I think? I think you must really like me," he says, pulling her into a damp hug. The side of his face touches hers and she can feel the exchange of sweat on her cheek and ear.

"I'm not in a place where I assign motivations to my actions," she says stiffly, unsure how to discourage him without just saying 'no.' He maneuvers so he's facing her, then pulls her towards him and presses his mouth to hers, pushing in his too-warm, too-soft tongue. She responds half-heartedly, but in the way she assumes he expects. Even the flesh of his lips feels flabby; when he puts pressure behind a kiss, there's no firmness, just a pliability that feels like his mouth is capable of stretching out and engulfing her whole head.

"Does that clear anything up for you?" he asks when he finally releases her. His voice is low like he's trying to be sexy.

"No," she says, seriously doubting that a problem has ever existed for which being kissed has provided the solution.

“Well, at least it was passionate.”

Tara hops off the table and resumes walking as fast as before, not looking back but knowing he will follow.

“You know what we should do?” he asks, catching up to walk beside her. “One night we both have free, I should come over to your place and cook dinner. Then we won’t be somewhere public. It might help you relax.”

Staying a night with him is a line she won’t cross. She flinches physically at the thought of him in her bed. She can barely stand to look at her backseat; how much worse would it be to associate that kind of helplessness with her home. She doesn’t even want him to know where she lives.

But she says, “Ok.”

“Cool.” He smiles, showing his square yellowed teeth, and she feels bad for being so shallow, for hating him for things that are trivial and probably not his fault. Tara remembers her mother’s frequent admonition: “But for the grace of God.” Her nails stab into her palms and she bites down on the sides of her tongue as she searches for the magic number of times she’ll have to see him before she can stop, the number that’s enough to qualify as fair but not enough to qualify as dating.

On Friday night O’Reilly’s is packed, loud and claustrophobic with patrons and frazzled staff, and Tara spends hours speeding from table to table, hauling dishes and wiping tabletops in mindless repetition. She’s exhausted from a week of work, arms and shoulders aching, unwilling to make the effort to view other people as anything but obstacles between her and completing her work, her and her bed. The only happy thought she has is that she’s closing tonight and Nick isn’t, so if she’s lucky, she’ll get to go straight home.

The restaurant’s mostly cleared out when Nick’s cut at eleven. Tara’s wiping down the last of his tables, less from kindness than from a desire for him to be gone,

when she blurrily senses a large body behind her, too close. Her insides tense like a threatened dog and she releases an annoyed huff through her nose, hoping Nick will take the hint and let her work. When his hand brushes against her ass, she flinches, panic rousing her somnolent brain enough to scan the room for anyone watching them. She angles her body away, awkward in the booth, to get him out of reach and in her line of sight.

“I close tonight,” she snaps. “If you want a ride, you’ll have to wait until two.”

“I was just saying hi,” he says, his face conveying both amusement and hurt. Normally, she’d feel a bit guilty for spurning a supposedly innocent gesture, but fatigue makes Tara far less charitable. She’s in no mood to emotionally babysit a grown man.

“Hi,” she says, voice flat, and she brushes past him towards a recently vacated four top, still stacked with plates, in Jesse’s section on the other side of the restaurant. Jesse never pre-busses his tables, but she can count on him to hover over them, vigilantly protective of cash tips. Nick hates Jesse, calls him a ‘frat boy who forgot to go to college,’ so she feels reasonably sure Nick won’t follow her. The first night they’d hooked up, he’d assured her that he wouldn’t tell their co-workers, that it was none of their business, and she’d thought he seemed a little proud to have a secret – not ‘lover,’ not ‘romance,’ applying those words made her ill - but a secret something, a secret worth keeping. Now she wonders if that secrecy will hold if she ends things with him. Tara’s hardly vain, but she knows, panic attacks aside, it’s her, not Nick, who has something to lose when it comes to reputation.

She concentrates on cleaning, loading her arms with dishes and disregarding the sauce stains on her clothes. As she gingerly plops the cheap dinnerware down on the counter by the cavernous sink, arranging the cups and plates carefully so they won’t topple to the floor, she senses she’s being unfair. Nick has never been vicious, never done anything to hurt her. It’s just that his attentions are suffocating; when she retreats and he follows it feels like being backed into a corner.

When she returns to the dining area, he’s gone, and though it’s what she wanted, she fails to feel relief. She walks back to Jesse’s table, less briskly than before, where

Vanessa, another hostess – a girl in her early twenties who's pretty and friendly and actually hosts – is filling salt shakers. Tara grabs a towel and sanitizer and is spraying the table when Vanessa addresses her.

“You friends with that Nick guy?” she asks, not at all unfriendly, but Tara's world stutters. She searches Vanessa's eyes for judgment and sees none, just casual curiosity. Tara breathes.

“No. Not really,” she replies, her voice controlled but a touch high pitched. “I mean, I don't really know him.” She thinks she's blushing and hopes Vanessa interprets it as shyness. “Why?”

“He watches you a lot,” she answers, sliding the salt back in place and moving to the next table. “And earlier, when you were talking, I couldn't tell if you guys were cool or if he was hassling you.”

“Yeah, no,” Tara replies, a little shaken. “We're cool.” She hadn't realized that Nick watches her, definitely not that he did so often enough that others could see. “I've given him a ride home a couple times. Since his car broke down.”

“That's nice of you. If he asked me, I would've made some excuse.” Vanessa shrugs guiltlessly at the admission. “Dude's creepy.”

Tara grits her teeth into something like a smile. “He is a bit,” she says, and she knows it's true. Even when he's being nice, she thinks his kindness is a little off, like he's following some good-guy script, though she feels hypocritical thinking it.

She remembers last time, after her second panic attack and she'd hunched away from his grasp, her forehead pressed to the back of the driver's seat, when he'd asked quite directly if she masturbated.

“Sort of,” she'd said. It was a silly answer, but the occasional vague, violent crotch rub – not for pleasure, just to make it stop, that inconvenient awareness that she had all of the same nerve endings and urges as everyone else but no way to satisfy them – didn't seem to earn the name. “I'm pretty bad at it.”

Nick had wrapped his soft arms around her, gently cradling her shoulder and waist, a gesture so clearly romantic that she resisted the impulse to shrug him off. He kissed her temple, put his mouth close to her ear so she could feel his breath. “Do you ever think about us?” he purred.

At that, Tara had let out a loud, derisive laugh. “No,” she said, not regretting the cruel bite in her voice. To be fair, his question was absurd. “I really don’t.”

“You girls gonna talk about that fat faggot all night? ‘Cause I’d really like to go home.” Jesse walks over to Tara and Vanessa, grinning at them with crooked white teeth, his arms folded across his moderate pecs.

“You’d already be gone if you cleaned your damn tables,” Vanessa shoots back, raising the salt container in faux violence.

Jesse laughs and picks Vanessa up by her waist; she squeals and swats at him playfully. Tara ignores them and wipes another table, scoping the restaurant to see if anyone else is about to leave, trying to mentally calculate how much work she’ll have to do after they close at one.

A glare from the manager prompts Jesse to settle Vanessa back on the floor. “You don’t mean that,” he says, not seeming to mind that it’s about twenty seconds past the time when a comeback could be called snappy. “If I did my own work, you girls wouldn’t have a reason to bend over my tables.”

Vanessa swats him again. “Nasty!” she says, but she laughs.

Tara knows she has to stop seeing Nick before it gets worse, before she has a moment of weakness (or maybe it’s strength, she’s not sure) and goes further than she can stand. Tara sleeps well Friday night and feels pretty clear-headed in the morning, better than she’s felt in a long time, and she figures tonight is her best chance to be rid of Nick. O’Reilly’s is busy on Saturdays, and at work she only sees him once when they’re waiting for orders to come up and she agrees to give him a ride home – a last ride home,

she decides, and smiles as fear and relief tremor through her belly. It's ridiculous, she thinks, to feel so free over so little.

Her palms slickly clench the steering wheel later as she drives down the dark suburban road. They're getting close to where they would turn to go to the parking lot, and she feels her heart accelerate as she sees each landmark – deer crossing, stop sign, strange mail box – each one ticking off the seconds leading to the inevitable advances.

Moments later, Nick puts his hand high on her thigh. She shoves it away.

“No,” she says, a slight quiver in her throat. “Not tonight.”

“Why not?” Nick's tone has an offness to it like a skipping record, like he's unsure if he's trying to seduce or wheedle, to push or wear down.

“I don't want to.”

He huffs in annoyance and grabs at her again, more forcibly this time, and she swings her right arm to smack him as well as she can without swerving the car.

“Stop it!” she yells. “I said ‘no.’”

“You've said ‘no’ before.” He leans in, and Tara knows he's right: her no's haven't been firm, and she hates herself for it.

“I mean it.” She struggles to keep her voice steady, rage and fear warring against her control. “I don't want this to get unfriendly, but I don't want to and you need to stop.”

Nick finally leans away from her, arranging his arms and face in an almost theatrical pout to showcase how unreasonable she's being. “Fine,” he says. “Why don't you want to?”

Tara's voice cracks when she answers, softening it so her intended rebuke comes out like a plea. “It's making me miserable.”

“Well, what about me?” he whines. Nick twists fully as he can in the car seat to face her, his features wrenched by a kind of violent desperation. “Can’t you do this for me?”

“I’m sorry,” she says, but her tone is unmovable, empty of remorse.

“Please.”

“No.”

“Tara, please.” His hands are actually clasped in supplication, but his voice fails to disguise his anger. “Tara, I am literally begging you.”

“And I am very sorry.”

“No, you’re not.” He crosses his arms and turns away from her – a gesture Tara might have found petulantly funny if his entitled tantrum weren’t gross and a little scary.

“Fine,” she says. “I’m not.”

A minute later she stops in front of his apartment. She tightens her grip on the steering wheel, not risking a glance in Nick’s direction. Her muscles are ready for a fight, though she hopes he just gets out of the car.

After a moment, he asks, “Do I at least get a kiss goodbye?” Everything about his manner is so unapologetic, so sure that Tara’s the one behaving poorly, it’s as though he’s all of her self-accusations of uncharitability made manifest. For a moment, Tara’s iron-firm convictions – that she must always put others before herself, that she must have unquestioned pity for human beings to whom life had not been kind – fall away, and she finally hates Nick more than she hates herself.

“Why the fuck would I want to kiss you?” she asks. “Have you seen yourself? Have you *smelled* yourself?” Tara knows her words are almost childish in their meanness. But they give her a sort of thrill, like she’s finally allowed to be honest without having to worry about consequences. Adrenaline surges through her in a delightful way, and she feels more awake than she has in months. “You’re disgusting. And yes, I know, I’m gross, too. I’m fat, my skin’s bad, I’m totally inept at sex. But are

you really so desperate that you're going to beg me – someone who clearly can't stand being near you – for a few bad pity hand jobs? Are you that much of a pathetic creep?"

"I thought you liked me." Nick's voice is rough, but at this point, Tara can't distinguish between reality and manipulation, and she doesn't care enough to try. She slides her tongue between her teeth and bites down a reply, but she can't help glancing towards him. The anger's still plain on his unattractive features, and the hurt, but mostly he just looks lost, like he truly doesn't understand. "Don't you care about me at all?" he asks.

"No."

Nick punches the dash, but the violent gesture is more defeated than threatening. "God damn it," he says. "I thought you were a good person, Tara."

Turning away from him, she digs her nails into the steering wheel plastic. "Well, I'm not. Get out of my car."

Nick unbuckles his seatbelt as belligerently as possible, hefts himself from the car (briefly exposing a section of his wide, pale back), and slams the door with a force that shakes the frame.

As she drives away, Tara feels a release like a thousand rubber bands have snapped inside her muscles. On some deep, gut level she knows that later she'll blame herself, that she'll be tortured as she plays out all of her mistakes, over and over, followed by all of the worst case ways Nick could behave if he's feeling vengeful. She'll feel stupid and ashamed and curl into herself under a blanket – she might even cry. But that's later. Now, she feels practically bruised by a relief so intense that even the final image she has of Nick – a helpless baby, pathetically screaming that he's in pain, that life's not fair – doesn't shake her for a moment. He can do whatever he likes, she thinks. Nick can kill himself tonight, write a note blaming her, and she'll be fine, it won't matter, because whatever he does can't touch her. Beyond the relief, underneath the shame and disgust, there's a giddy warmth in the conviction wordlessly nestled deep in her chest, that if one of them is going to be miserable, she wants it to be him.

Binding the Strawman

It's a special sort of pleading, studying gods, trying to choose. For if one god is invention, we cannot claim that humans will not live kill die solely for their creations. Deflate the conflict: one god is God, the rest are devils. If you will not believe the wisdom of the ancients, the authority of authorities, why on earth would you trust your own mind? That we are energy, stardust animate, is most plausible on hallucinogens. Then again, so are ghosts. On morphine, I am senseless and warm as a fresh corpse. Using physical forces only, prove I shouldn't tie you to that chair and bleed you dry. Show your work, and remember *please stop* is not an argument.

I've been trying to find my soul since I was four. Terrified of demons, I'd invite demons, so I could believe in demons. I attack myself *ad hominem*. It's easy; I'm a psychogenetic mess. It got bad when I learned there are robots who lie, worse when I learned they self-sacrifice. I start projects and imagine my hands as bones. On starry nights I hurl rocks skyward, comforted by my inability to hit anything that might matter. It's a false dichotomy, this belief that what is not eternal is already dead. And isn't that the point, to be rational? Yet ask who I am and I answer back: just cause and effect, birth and death, death and death.

Hubble as Pornographer

Desperation is rarely quiet and mine is oh-so-close
to that of a street-screamer, telling passersby we're
dying like I'm some all-high prophet of the obvious.

Art is a sock I jerk off in,
thinking of sun flares,
nebulas,
the innards of star
factories,
because humans,
even naked ones,
are all too
young,
all too close to death.

Sex alone can't distract from our self- stimulation,
the parsing and stacking, that constant racket,
the contemplation of a mind by itself.

Caught in an ecstasy of hydrogen
and equations, dumbstruck
by marvels older than God,
even the brightest of us
gaze into the cosmos
with the wonder of
lost monkeys
trapped in doomed shuttles,
thrilling with the brilliant
terror of space,
floating,
screaming,
wanking into oblivion.

Girl

I thought I was a girl,
 but I am a ship.
 Of course. A ship.
 I should have known.
 When they gave me a name,
 and called me “she,”
 their pretty girl,
 I got confused.

I don’t want this to be about sex.
 This isn’t a metaphor:
 I am a ship.
 Is “vessel” suggestive?
 It fits.
 I am a vessel,
 filled wholly with ghosts.

I am blue grey.
 A ship.
 Dull metal.
 My sides reflect
 the too calm color
 of the sea and sky.

I am a ship – wait.
 A spaceship?
 Yes.
 Black, not blue grey.
 If I were a girl,
 the empty would hug
 the air from my lungs,
 but, without breathing,
 I live.

Floating, wrecked,
 without power,
 sunk, stuck
 in a bottle.
 A ship, not a girl.
 A ship, a ship!

You Reach A Point Like Rain

You reach a point like rain, of heaviness and dropping.

Your hard-won place in the ether, lost.

You called your grandmother once a week for nothing.

You smiled at the garbageman for nothing.

It was a performance, yes, but not a deception.

It was a trick of tales stacked like subtle blocks.

They said a word from you purified, your mouth refracted rainbows.

You were said to test the numbers of the sands.

You were meant to speak a challenge to the stars.

Instead you splash the pavement, bust, and mix with grit.

Everyone sees that drunk man pee on you.

Yellowed, you sully sewer grates.

Liquid to liquid, they say. Dust to dust.

How Hard You Can Hit A Woman

Lana Grey was *smiling* at him. The insanity of this pumped through Silas' already strained mind as he glimpsed her waiting in the wings and took in the sight of her perfect white teeth, not yet shielded by the mouth guard she would insert before he was contractually obligated to punch her in the face.

Silas had never hit a woman, hadn't hit anyone since he got sober, but soon he'd be stepping into the studio boxing ring, squaring up to deck his newly (and secretly) ex-girlfriend on national cable television – a moment he'd known about for weeks, dreaded, debated, but which was now impossibly real as he stood at his podium stage right, eyes on Lana, while another celebrity couple had it out in the ring. Last night he'd lain in bed, not blinking, and contemplated wrenching his arm until it sprained or broke, freeing himself from making the public choice to hit Lana or walk away. It was a pathetic fantasy, ridiculous, like a Christian teen praying for a miscarriage, but now he wished he'd gone on and injured himself. Sweat, tense muscles, a tingle in his fists: these were just elements of stage fright. Potentially overwhelming, but nothing new to a seasoned comic and certainly nothing that would impair Silas' ability to host a show like Tough Love. More troubling was the familiar sting of dread – acidic clench of the stomach, a fogging on the edges of his vision. Some distant detached part of him recognized these symptoms as signs that he might be in real trouble, that his body was taking over and his mind would have to accept its decisions.

"You need to be an adult about this, Si," Lana had said, sounding bored, when he'd called a week ago to beg her to back out. "If you were thinking clearly, you'd realize I'm doing you a favor." She was right, to an extent. Lana Grey wasn't quite a household name, but as pop-country-singer-turned-actress, she was a divisive one. The draw for her fans and the people who'd want to see her punched in the face would probably account for half of the episode's views, not to mention the YouTube clips and resulting press once it got out that she'd already dumped him before the fight. Her being on Tough Love was a smart move, media-wise, one that theoretically benefited him much more than it did her. Lana apparently didn't mind doing his show and pretending for old times' sake. Her presence was an act of cold-blooded kindness.

Silas beamed at the camera, clapping along with the studio audience as the referee blew her whistle to end the current bout. Hilary Oster and Charlie Molerno (the sprinter and the actor, respectively, whose budding romance was considered one of the sweetest and least expected outcomes of the summer Olympics) had just completed a very amiable and evenly matched spar, and as they stepped out of the ring they were handed Gatorade (not labeled as such – if they weren't going to agree to sponsorship they sure as hell weren't getting it for free) and directed to sit on the couch between the podium and the ring.

“Wow!” Silas said with forced enthusiasm. “Talk about a match made in heaven. If you two show that kind of stamina elsewhere, you’re going to have a long and happy life together.” As the crowd chuckled, Hilary and Charlie shared a private, happy look and snuggled their slightly sweaty bodies closer together. Their fight had left an incredible positivity in the room; it was a good wave for Silas to ride, the perfect act to follow. Anyone who didn't know Silas intimately enough to see the cornered wildness in his eyes would think he was unflustered, a portrait of professionalism and control, a host enjoying his show. Inside he felt hot and ill: every noise and light was oppressive and grating. Earlier in the bathroom he'd thrown up some bile and he could still feel the burn under his sternum and smell the sick on his breath.

Silas turned to the couple on the couch. “Let's see what they have to say about it. I really thought she had you for a minute there, Charlie. What's it like being with a woman who can bench you?”

“Oddly, that's never really come up,” Charlie replied. He turned to his girlfriend. “Though you're welcome to try if you want.”

“I think I'll pass,” said Hilary, shooting Silas an annoyed glance that made him think she wouldn't have gone so easy if he'd been the one in the ring with her.

He turned back to the crowd. “One more round of applause for Charlie and Hilary. May they have many years together and very few fist fights.” Clapping and ‘aw’s from the audience. “And now for a special treat, something I'm sure so many of you have been hoping for since this show began, if not much longer. Tonight, you will all finally see me get my ass kicked by someone who wants to more than all of you combined. Ladies and gentlemen and everything in between, please join me in

welcoming my self-declared better half, you know her as one of the brightest stars on the country music scene and from the new movie *Queen of the Castle*, the one and only Lana Grey!”

Lana crossed the stage waving and blowing kisses as the crowd welcomed her with enthusiasm, many standing and cheering. She looked as beautiful as Silas had ever seen her: wavy brown hair pulled back in a gentle pony-tail, make-up perfectly understated, dressed for the fight in a grey track suit that added a pleasant roundness to her tiny body. He felt a pounding in his temples and realized that he was grinning far too fiercely. His face ached as it softened, and he crossed to meet her center stage, where she pulled him into a side hug so they remained facing the crowd instead of each other. His skin itched hotly, burned with a blend of disgust and desire at every point of contact. Her sweet chemical scent hit him like a memory, doing nothing to help the nausea or the tense pain in his head, and he wondered if she could smell him too, if her body wanted him close and far away at the same time. The hug lasted just long enough to be seen as affectionate, before Lana stepped away.

“All right, honey, any last words before we rumble?” Silas said, flexing his skinny arms. The audience laughed as he pulled an exaggerated tough face and threw some mock punches.

“Hey, don’t worry about me, old man,” Lana chided. “I just hope your heart doesn’t give out.” For a moment, it felt like it did, and then he remembered that she was referring to him being nearly ten years her senior, not to his current elevated pulse. She’d never read him well when they were dating; there was little chance she’d tuned in now. There may have been a barb in there about heartbreak, but that was probably Silas’ masochistic wishful thinking. She gave him a playful, almost flirtatious, punch on the shoulder and made a slight calculated turn to include the cameras and crowd in the conversation. “Don’t you underestimate me, Silas Smithers. Us country girls are built tough.”

There was an eruption of cheers, mostly women’s brassy ‘woos’ of support, expressions of rural female pride – pride, in this case, of their particular ability to take a punch from a scrawny TV host. He and Lana were hardly going to have a real

conversation in front of thousands of people, but Silas wished she would stop playing to the crowd.

As they walked to the ring, elevated a couple of steps above the stage, Silas handed a ringside PA his suit jacket and accepted his boxing gloves. On the opposite end, Lana did the same. They ducked through the ropes, and Silas gave the referee a gloved fist-bump, earning tittering laughs from the crowd and an exaggerated eyeroll from Lana that he wasn't sure how to interpret. He caught the gaze of Miranda Schiffing, the show's producer, standing front and center behind the main camera. She gave him a serious nod. Before the taping, she had coached Silas with a dummy, telling him where to hit Lana and how hard, so that they would earn the publicity of the past weeks' controversy but not overdo it and become monsters in the press. There had been a highly publicized incident about a month previous wherein a male pop singer had beaten his B-list actress girlfriend badly enough that she'd been hospitalized, which positioned Tough Love's decision to do a special celebrity episode somewhere in that magical realm between poor taste and topical brilliance. Critics could bitch on their blogs all they wanted; they'd been railing since the first rumors rumbled across the internet a year earlier about the network greenlighting a couples' fistfight game show. As long as the majority of articles said things like "controversial" or "have they gone too far?," then press was good. Their publicist could spin whatever happened as post-feminist and thereby accuse detractors of thinking women were weak.

"Don't look so nervous, Si," she said. "I'll go easy on you."

"Don't worry about me, babe," he heard himself say, trying and failing to see any reaction from Lana to the endearment. "Let's do this." His voice was playful, but he felt a steel door lock in his gut, his heartbeat clanging *doom doom doom* against it. The stage lights dimmed, a spotlight illuminating the ring at the center. Silas licked his lips, dry from nerves. His body felt like a foreign object, a loud broken machine he had to try and operate. Cheesy dramatic music played from the speakers. Both fighters inserted their mouth guards. The crowd was hooting, clapping and stamping, and Silas could swear it was louder, more violent than usual, causing his head to thrum with it, as though his mind was Pandora's box and they were the creatures inside. Lana's fists were up; she looked confident, professional, untouchable. Silas wanted to run, but instead he searched for a

point to focus on, to keep him steady. His eyes fixed again on Lana's smile, framed by full pink lips and tan skin, still pretty even if the teeth were now rubber and green. The room around him seemed to bend and blur and wait for Silas to move.

"Wait wait wait – you didn't sign on, right?" Eric demanded. "Don't tell me you're actually doing the show?"

Silas nodded. It was over a year before Tough Love would go into production, six months before he'd meet Lana Grey on the set of a late night talk show and surprise himself by obtaining her phone number. Silas and Eric, another comic, were sitting at the bar among the other late-night patrons of the Joke Barn after doing guest spots for Dora Costa, a good friend of Silas' who'd been headlining that week. Silas had decided that telling Eric would be a good litmus test for how his more socially conscious peers would react to his new gig. It would be a hard sell for a lot of people, but the opportunity to have his face on TV every week was game-changing, the kind of exposure he couldn't pass up. Even so, it had taken him a while to warm up to the idea; when his agent first told him that the show would involve couples physically fighting each other, Silas had balked. It didn't sound any better when he described it to Eric; his friend's chubby, bearded face wrinkled with disgust, like he'd found dentures in a sandwich.

"What the fuck, Si?" scolded Eric, gesturing sharply with his hands and almost spilling his beer. "Domestic abuse is a real problem, and you're turning it into a joke for money? I knew you were a degenerate, but this is sick."

Silas exhaled loudly and scowled up at the bottles lining the wall of the bar, wishing he could change the subject, or go back in time five minutes and tell himself to shut the hell up. "I knew you'd be a dick about this."

"I'm not trying to be a dick-"

"You don't have to try, sweetie," said Dora, walking up behind them. "You're in a natural state of dickishness." Dora was a short woman, kind of stocky with big expressive features, and as she stood between their stools she had to reach to wrap both

men into a fierce half-hug. “So what did you do to piss him off?” she asked, nodding towards Eric.

“Oh, you know. The usual. Breathing. Saying words,” said Silas, fondly ruffling Dora’s bowl-cut black hair. “Good set tonight. Have a drink?” He smirked and raised his tonic with lime, thankful for the interruption and the probable ally. Dora was a few years younger than they were, in her late twenties, more laid back and newly sober, too – about three years, just a little longer than Silas. On his second anniversary, she’d given him a variety pack of gourmet sodas with a note that said *Not what you want, but better than water.*

Dora ordered a Diet Coke and slid onto the stool next to Silas.

“Tell her,” Eric demanded, in the sort of fake-mad voice that channels real frustration. He turned his body to face them, an imposing wall of plaid and beard, and crossed his arms in disapproval. He looked like some sort of lumberjack principal. “Tell her what a sick fuck sell-out you are.”

“Ooh, yes, tell me about that,” she said with the eager confidence of a woman difficult to offend. Silas had met Dora four years earlier at a comedy contest in Austin. They’d seen a comic do disturbingly well with an awful set of women and gay jokes – jokes like “You ever notice how even though women have been in charge of cooking for hundreds of years, most great chefs are men? Is there anything women are actually good at? I’d say sucking cock, but I don’t know, maybe gay guys have it right.” and “How many fags does it take to screw in a lightbulb? None, lightbulbs don’t have assholes.” Silas, who had already been eliminated, was livid and drunk and in the kind of dizzy riled-up mood that made picking a fight with a no-talent prick sound like a great way to let off steam. His plan was to catch him in the parking lot and talk shit until the guy said something back, attacked him, or left. Silas wasn’t much of a fighter; most of his friends considered him pretty easy-going, more likely to throw insults than blows. But there were times when every irritation seemed to build like pressure in his limbs, and he wanted to make something bleed. Normally, he’d take that feeling to an isolated place and scream and break things where no one could see. Sometimes he’d have to settle for

snapping sticks or pencils quietly in his hands, or causing himself pain in little ways, biting his tongue or digging his nails into his palms. Anything to keep the rage down until he had the chance to cool off. There were a couple more comics to go, so Silas sat in a whisky-haze of anticipation, lost in fantasies of flesh colliding painfully with flesh, as on stage the host introduced Dora. It was the sort of contest comics often found dull to watch – everyone bringing their A-game, their polished jokes, nothing spontaneous – but when Dora took the mic, Silas felt a shift in energy that alerted him to pay attention. She smiled aggressively as she scanned the crowd for the affronting comic, then for the next six minutes, looking straight at him, she ripped his set apart to the fickle crowd's delight, pausing her mocking once to ask him why he had to make her do this. "I had a nice set planned," she'd said. "I was going to talk about cartoons and drugs and my ex-girlfriend, and now not only do these people not get to hear those jokes, but you're going to feel even worse when you're outdone by a lady-faggot making stuff up." Dora's vitriolic rant soothed the heat of Silas' temper, like she'd rubbed aloe on his brain, and after the final results were announced (Dora landing 3rd, the other guy not placing), Silas met her at the bar to introduce himself and congratulate her. "Thanks," she'd said, accepting his offer of a victory shot. "I learned a long time ago you can't shut idiots up by arguing with them. You gotta shut them up by beating them."

In the current case, Silas wasn't sure who was the idiot, him or Eric, but he did wish Eric would shut up. "Don't get too excited," he said, striving to keep the conversation's tone as light as possible. "It's nothing bad. I just accepted a job hosting this cable game show, so now Eric thinks I'm the anti-Christ. Or possibly the Buddhist equivalent."

"Sweet," said Dora. "Good for you, man."

"It's not just a game show." Eric leaned forward on the bar to look past Silas and address Dora. "He's hosting a show where couples fistfight to solve their problems while Silas tells jokes. He'll basically be MCing domestic violence."

Dora blinked. "Wow. So it's like just the fight parts of Jerry Springer? I might actually watch that."

“Don’t you think it’s reprehensible?” asked Eric.

“Of course it’s reprehensible,” Silas said with a flippant wave of his hand. “But it might also be fun, so I’m doing it.”

“It’s not going to be fun. It’s going to be hacky bullshit with some wife-beating thrown in, and you’re going to hate yourself.” As he spoke, Eric looked straight at Silas with a sincere intensity that made Silas feel like hundreds of disapproving eyes were on him. Soon enough, he realized, there would be. “Just go back on the road. At least when you sell your soul in a club it’s only recorded on some asshole’s cell phone.”

“Well, I’m glad you took the job,” interjected Dora. “You’ve seemed kinda bummed lately. Even if the show sucks, it pays, and I think a change will be good for you.”

“Thanks. See?” Silas swiveled to face Eric. “That’s how a friend responds to good news.”

“I’m sorry, but I can’t be excited about you making light of abuse,” said Eric.

“Will you stop saying abuse? It’s not abuse.” Silas slammed his drink on the counter, harder than he meant to. Two comics sitting at the other corner of the bar shot him bemused looks. He gave a friendly nod and continued in a subdued voice. “People don’t volunteer to go on television and win prizes for abuse. The couples on the show are going to have pre-screenings and background checks and all that crap, so it won’t be abusers, just fame seeking idiots and couples who enjoy fighting. Before the fight they’ll talk about issues in their relationship – stupid stuff, like she always shops or he never cleans – then they rough each other up a bit, we all pretend they solved something and we give them some money. No one’s trapped, no one’s harmed. It’s not about abuse.”

He downed the last of his tonic, holding back the ice and lime with his upper lip and avoiding looking at either of his friends. It made him uncomfortable that he was getting defensive; his day jobs never made him defensive. Most people in his field understood that doing a commercial or even writing for a TV show didn’t mean that you were invested in its message. That’s why Silas had been able to write for In Bob We

Trust for two years without exploding: sure, the show was backwards and cookie cutter, with all of the quiet sexism, racism, and homophobia that comes with a lazily written traditional sitcom, but Silas hadn't felt tainted by it. There was a general acceptance that it was just a hoop to jump through, a shit job to work, and he couldn't be blamed for the show's offensive stupidity any more than a McDonalds employee could be blamed for the menu.

"Besides," he continued, turning from Dora to Eric with a practiced smile, "the way this Schiffing lady was talking, it sounds like I'm going to have some control, at least over what I say. So I can make sure it's not taken the wrong way." Silas threw a dollar down to tip and pushed himself off of his stool. "I'm heading out." Dora and Eric began to gabble apologetically, but Silas cut them off. "Guys, I'm fine. I'll see you tomorrow. It's just been a long day." This was technically true, though he didn't like the tightening he felt in his chest, like a cloud had passed through him and left a storm inside. He needed to be alone, to let it pass.

Silas hadn't wanted a drink so badly in years. They'd just finished taping the fourth episode of *Tough Love*, and his nerves were too frayed for him to think of anything but getting out of that building and home to Lana. He and Lana had moved in together a month earlier, which in retrospect may not have been the best idea when so much else in his life was changing. At the time he'd wanted to ride the momentum, to see how many good things were within his grasp. And while the past month had not been their best, Silas definitely considered living with Lana a good thing. For one, their new apartment was an incredible step up from the places he'd been able to afford on his own as a single comic in LA. It was surprisingly nice to have modern appliances, a bathroom without cracked tiles, and a floor plan that had been drafted within the last decade.

More important, though, was Lana. It didn't matter that they had been bickering the past few weeks (he was stressed, and what couple doesn't have problems in their early days of cohabitation?); he still felt maddeningly lucky to have someone like her to argue with.

When Silas first asked for her number, he really hadn't expected it to go anywhere. Lana was 27 and had been famous for nearly a decade; the idea of her being with a 36 year old comedian as anything more than a brief diversion was absurd. So when they'd gone out for dinner and drinks and fell into a conversation that wasn't just enjoyable or personal, but also entirely natural – Silas had felt like his whole understanding of the universe had been somewhat off and it was in fact far more benevolent than he'd ever allowed himself to believe. Because Lana Grey was more than just beautiful and famous, traits that tended to make him uncomfortable: she could also be rude, perverse, and cynical in the most perfect ways. He'd learned that she didn't really have a relationship with her parents, who had been well off but whose accomplishments were far from singular. "I was an investment," she'd said, laughing darkly over her second glass of merlot. "The pay-off is my success. The most I hear from either of them is when I'm between projects. They claim it's because I have more free time and they miss me, or they just want to give advice, but I can just hear the fear that their stock is tanking." He'd joked in return about his over-coddling mother who died when he was 16, which left him alone with his disapproving father, saying that if scientists could gather all the families like his together he was sure they could isolate the perfect comedic formula. It was then, when he realized that he could distinguish between her "I'm supposed to laugh now" laugh and the genuine article, that he knew he could really fall for this girl.

After four dates, he'd told his friends about her, and most of them acted as though it was a bad prank. When he'd finally convinced Eric he was serious, Eric's jaw had dropped like he was a cartoon. "Lana Grey?" he'd said. "She's... young. And incredibly hot. I mean, wow. Well done." Silas gave him a dopey, self-satisfied grin, nearly as proud as he was delighted to hear the usually articulate Eric gabble praise about his new girlfriend. He wasn't even fazed when Eric asked, "But what the hell does she see in *you*?"

Dora, on the other hand, had just smiled, shaking her head fondly, and said, "Good luck. Idiot."

It was now seven months later, and Silas was in his first serious relationship since his mid-twenties, and he found that he kind of liked having someone to look at him in disgust when he ate Tums a few at a time like candy, mashing the flavored calcium into a paste with his teeth and chasing it with black coffee. (He didn't tell her this, but he was afraid his ulcer was coming back.) He felt privileged to have someone else invested in him, in his health and success; it made everything he did feel more important, less like a game.

This was why, even in the difficult moments when they weren't getting along and the show seemed like a dead end or a catastrophe waiting to happen, when Silas felt himself slipping towards that dark mental place that had once led him to drink, so angry and helpless that he'd rush out of the studio after a shoot with a false smile wrenching his face and lock himself safely in his car where he'd scream and curse at the top of his lungs until he was gasping for air, he was happy he had Lana. To love him, to stabilize him, even to shout at him that he was being a selfish goddamned man-child. Knowing that he was going home to the nicest apartment he'd ever been able to afford, to a girlfriend who was beautiful and successful and cared about him – it was reassuring. Affection aside (and there was affection; he wasn't doing *that* well for himself), Lana Grey was too savvy to hitch herself to a disaster.

At least what happened in the ring had been an accident. As soon as the man saw blood, he backed away, sputtering panicked apologies as the standby medics rushed into the ring to help his injured partner. It was a pitiful scene: the small man covering his nose with his boxing gloves; the larger watching, almost sobbing his apologies as he leaned helplessly against the ropes; the bright blood splatters on their sleeves, more spilling down the small man's face to ruin his light blue shirt. Afterwards, Silas had felt ashamed that as the medics were ascertaining the extent of the injuries, he'd only felt irritation that shooting would be delayed, as well as the more nagging, guilty relief that if this had to happen, thank god it was between two men – never mind that one outweighed the other by a good 50 lbs, a man hitting a man wasn't a scandal, it wasn't even news. It didn't take long for the medics to announce that nothing was broken and it was just a bloody nose. Silas had to tell jokes to re-engage a shaken crowd while behind him the

blood was cleaned from the stage and the couple was taken to wardrobe to be dressed in fresh clothes.

The husbands had been good sports about the incident, had laughed it off. “Really, it was more surprising than painful,” the smaller man explained, rubbing a reassuring hand on his sheepish partner’s back. An hour later they were reshooting, but Silas couldn’t escape a sense that the energy of the room had shifted, that on some primal level blood demanded to be taken seriously.

Silas couldn’t help but remember the ecstasy he’d felt the first time he’d walked across the furnished stage. He’d known it wasn’t all for him (if he’d turned the host position down, of course someone else would have filled it), but when he looked at the set – the green couch in the partially roped off bullpen where contestants would sit before and after fighting, the ring, the podium, and most of all the little elevated platform where he would introduce the show with a late-night style monologue – despite his reservations he’d felt a surge of excitement, of authenticity, like he’d taken the next big step to becoming whatever it was he was going to be. He’d been so nervous before the first episode, which featured an unhappily unmarried couple in their mid-forties. Her mother had just died; his son was in rehab. They both had exes who caused them trouble. When they’d fought, Silas spent the whole bout tense, like he was ready to somehow help the ref intervene if things got too brutal. But they didn’t: both the man and the woman were beat up a bit, patches of bruises darkening their skin before they even left the stage, but they ended in better spirits than when they began. Silas was relieved – delighted, even, that the show’s insane premise could work and he wasn’t totally screwed – but he didn’t understand how it had happened. When he called Dora the next day, he’d told her about the couple, how wailing on each other appeared to bring them closer, and asked if she had any thoughts. “I don’t know,” she’d said. “Maybe it’s just the healing power of television.”

It wasn’t as though Silas’ optimism hadn’t taken some hits prior to the incident with the blood. During the second week of filming, Miranda had informed him that, while he would be writing his own jokes, they would have to fit within strict guidelines. Then there were the grumbles of ill will from his comedy peers and the not-so-flattering

assessments of his talents and ethics from reviewers, which were easy enough to avoid during the day when he was busy and had Lana to squabble with, but were irresistibly compelling at 3 am when all he had to keep his mind occupied were his laptop and the wet rustle of Lana's sleeping breathe. All of this got to him more than it should, because most of the time, he was glad he had taken the job on Tough Love. He didn't mean to burden Lana with his anxieties and frustrations, but she was nearly the only person he saw these days. The most Silas had heard from Eric since the show started was periodic texts telling him he needed to quit. Dora was more supportive, but she was on the road, and when he texted her complaining about the show, she replied: "Im in texas & the guy driving me to the club thinks gays & muslims are turning america socialist. IE BOO FUCKING HOO! Srsly though that sucks man."

When Silas returned home that evening, Lana was sprawled uncharacteristically on their white couch, a glass of wine in her hand. Her eyes were puffy and she was not looking at him in a way that made his stomach drop in a way that was new to Silas but familiar in its painful, cliché predictability.

"We need to talk, Silas."

He froze for a moment, then choked a hoarse laugh. "Seriously? 'We need to talk?'" he said, his voice raised slightly. "Are we really doing that bullshit? Fuck that. No. I'm not having a 'We need to talk, Silas' conversation."

"Fine then," she said. "How about 'You need to leave, Silas.'"

"Why?" he asked, crossing the room towards the chair by the couch to get into her line of sight. He chose not to sit down

"I can't do this," said Lana. Her eyes were cast down and sideways towards the floor, and she was cupping her wine glass in both hands like she was making an offering. "You can't afford this place on your own –"

"I mean," said Silas, bristling, "why do you want me to leave?"

Lana shook her head. "It was silly of me to think this was permanent."

Silas wished he had something in his hands to throw or break. He wanted to yank Lana up from the couch and hold her by the shoulders so that she would look him in the face instead of talking about him like he was some lost cause. Instead he clenched his trembling fists, bit down hard on his tongue, and waited for the woman he loved to explain why being with him was so ridiculous.

“I mean, Silas, you’ve been making yourself sick over a cable show,” she said, finally looking at him. She sat up straight, placing her wine on the glass coffee table. Lana was in professional mode, and Silas felt suddenly outgunned. “Dealing with this kind of pressure is a huge part of my life, and you get the smallest taste and become impossible to live with. I care about you, Silas, but I don’t know if you can handle a really big break. Or I couldn’t handle you.”

“Don’t tell me what I can’t handle!” he bellowed.

The fight got heated then, each of them digging deep into the other’s faults and secrets, once excavated so delicately from layers of self-protection. Silas was lazy, weak, a former alcoholic with mommy and daddy issues who just wanted a replacement parent he could fuck. Lana was a cold, engineering harpy who couldn’t love a person once she discovered even the smallest flaw. Silas was afraid of success. Lana didn’t realize how much of her success was because men wanted to hate-fuck her, and she’ll see how ‘talented’ she was when her tits dropped. Silas was a selfish bastard. Lana was, too. It ended with them sitting on the couch, fury exhausted but still so embittered and wounded. Silas rubbed his face with his hands. Lana patted him on the shoulder when she stood up to walk away, but did not apologize.

“But if I move out,” he said, hesitant, to her retreating back. “The rent- ”

Lana turned towards him and laughed, sadly. “I can handle the rent on my own,” she said. “Honestly, for the price of this place? I could rent the one across the hall too, if I needed the space. You really don’t have to worry about my finances.”

When he heard the click of the bedroom door, Silas grabbed Lana’s wine glass and carried it into the kitchen. It would be poetic, he thought, to crash and burn now, to

opt out of this game he apparently couldn't handle. There were a lot of older comics he knew and admired who'd never made it big, who travelled the country doing shows in clubs, drinking and doing drugs and saying whatever the hell they wanted. He imagined himself in ten years, cantankerous and gutter voiced and half burned out from vice and travel, a tattooed broad on each arm, telling young comedians that they couldn't win, that the only way to stay true to themselves was to fail.

Silas chucked the glass hard onto the kitchen floor. The larger chunks teetered noisily to a stop as the red wine pooled on the white tile, reminding Silas of the blood spilled earlier, like a prophecy of loss. He was unnerved by the swimmy feeling in his head, the way his heart was racing and everything seemed too bright, too loud. He took a few deep breaths and closed his eyes, not opening them when he heard footsteps behind him. His throat was tight, but he forced out the words, "I'll clean it up."

"Good," said Lana, her voice neutral. "Please do." Silas kept his face hidden as she padded her way back into the bedroom, clenching his eyes and mouth to fight tears. After a few moments, he wiped away the dampness that escaped and carefully stepped around the liquid and broken glass to grab a roll of paper towels.

Four days later, Silas had moved out.

Three weeks after breaking up with Lana, Silas was waiting uncomfortably in Miranda Schiffing's office. The unease he felt wasn't just because her requests to meet with him were always unreadable and brusque, giving no impression whether he was about to be praised or fired or simply schooled on new ideas or procedures. The office itself was unsettling, looking less like the lair of a reality TV exec and more like the study of an academic with a passion for pop culture. On every wall she had shelves of books and magazines, posters and memorabilia from shows that were, regardless of quality, iconic game-changers. Silas was pretty sure she was a communications or sociology major gone rogue. In their first meeting, he'd expressed some concerns and had been surprised to find that his boss was as amoral as she was intelligent and well-read, that her

extensive education had not so much informed principles of how the world should be as provided her with a knowledge of other peoples' ethics that she used like an arsenal.

"So obviously we won't just stand by and let a guy beat the crap out of his wife, right?" he'd asked, awkwardly, uncertain yet where Miranda stood on the show's concept. She was at least fifty, and she dressed in a professional but frumpy way that reminded him of an old-school women's studies professor. "I mean, I'm sure we'll be policing this?"

Miranda had smirked, resting her elbows on her cluttered oak desk and her chin on her large clasped hands. "I don't see why there should be any more limitations on men than on women," she said. "Of course with most couples, both parties will be holding back so that the pain and damage is minimal, and that's what we want on the show. But the reality is that every fight has a victor and a loser, based on size and skill and motivation and luck. I think bringing it down to gender is a bit silly and reductive, don't you?"

"I see your point," he replied, but what he really saw was that Miranda was an expert with an informed intuition as to what was addictive and what was objectionable about the harsher aspects of domestic drama. Silas wasn't sure if this worked for him or against him.

"Look," Miranda continued, evidently sensing his skepticism, "our official stance is that women are just as capable as men, both in terms of making their own decisions and knowing what they can handle. It isn't our job to provide extra protection because women traditionally have smaller frames. That would be patronizing, anachronistic, and beyond our rights and responsibilities as providers of entertainment."

"I get that that's the official stance," he said, knowing to argue was pointless, but apprehensive enough to protest just a bit more. "But what about personally?"

"Personally?" Miranda leaned forward, pressing her hands palms down on her desk. Her expression was amused but had a gravity to it that made him believe she was for the moment sincere. "I've met enough women who expected someone else to take

care of them, who ended up victims. I think that it's about time that women learn to take care of themselves.”

Months after that first meeting, the office was the same, but Silas felt very different in it. Gone was the nervous man sitting with a straight back, eagerly hoping to make a good impression and that he didn't have anything on his face. Silas now was slouched, tired, and irritable. He wondered how he'd gotten to a point where he felt like a stranger in his own mind, like someone had reached inside of him and moved things around without asking. The heavy wooden door opened, and Silas twisted in his chair to see Miranda Schiffing walk in, a file under one arm, her smart phone in her other hand.

“Silas, wonderful to see you. How are you?” she asked pleasantly, settling into her desk chair. Two weeks earlier Silas had sent Miranda an e-mail trying to resign because ‘Lana dumped me and nothing matters and I'm going to go live in a cave and catch rabies from a bat and die.’

“Terrible,” he said. “Obviously.” He knew that he looked a wreck; even if he hadn't seen himself he could have figured it out when his make-up sessions drew longer each day he and Lana were apart. He'd been sleeping on Dora's couch with the aid of Ambien, his eating habits were worse than usual, and there was still the constant, wretched, super-villainesque desire for everyone in the world to die so he could have some time alone.

“I talked to Lana this morning,” she said, as though that weren't a heart-stoppingly awful thing for her to say to him. “You two haven't gone public with your break-up.”

“Thanks, yeah, I sort of know what's going on in my own life.”

“I told you about that celebrity couples edition set for two weeks from now, with Hilary Oster and Charlie Molerno confirmed,” Miranda continued. “I wanted to let you know that Lana's agreed, too.”

“No!” he barked, springing from his chair and looking around like he was about to run from a predator. “We broke up, we're not a couple, I can't – No.”

“It’s not optional, Silas,” Miranda said, in a tone that confirmed she had no intention of relenting. “You signed a contract saying that if we wanted you to fight someone and they agreed to it, you would. I don’t give two shits that you two aren’t a couple any more. Lana will be a good draw, the viewers know you, it’s perfect. She’s in, so you’re in. Arguing is a waste of time.”

“You’re a vicious cunt, you know that?” Silas snarled, collapsing back to sit on the chair and leaning his forehead into his hands. His eyes were itchy and becoming wet, and pride required that he get this impotent misery under control, or at least channel it into something less pathetic, before he could again look at this woman who seemed so bent on breaking him down. When he pulled himself together, Miranda was watching him with eyes that were apologetic but unmoved.

“Ok,” he said desperately, “how about if I fight Molerno and Hilary and Lana fight each other? Like a wife-swap deal, but the joke’s Molerno’s the wife-”

“Silas.” Miranda’s unplucked eyebrows were raised slightly, as though he’d just said something too idiotic to be offensive. “This is a couples’ show. That wouldn’t make sense. And anyway, Charlie’s in top shape and he’s hardly a match against Hilary. Are you suggesting Lana would be better off fighting an Olympic athlete than you – because they’re both women? That’s incredibly sexist. I’m honestly a bit shocked.”

Not too long ago, he would have thought he was above begging. Now, he’d kiss her loafered feet if he thought it would make a difference. “Miranda, please. I can’t be the guy who beat up his ex-girlfriend on TV. There’s no good angle on this. If we act friendly and I’m easy on her, then when the truth gets out I’ll look pathetic, making nice with the woman who broke my heart because she’s more famous than I am. If I hurt her-” Silas stopped, not wanting to consider all of the ways that could play out. It was only in the past week that he’d begun to feel like himself again, rather than a chemical stew of every dreadful feeling in the human wheelhouse. “Please, please, let me fight someone else. I’ll punch women. That’s not the problem. I’ll punch women every episode, if that’s what you really want. Pretend it’s feminist, I don’t care. A friend of mine volunteered. Dora Costa. She’s funny. I’m actually living with her now, so we can

pretend it's a rebound, make the break-up announcement on the show. Just don't make me fight Lana."

"Dora Costa won't bring us 5 million viewers. And even my mother could work out Dora's a lesbian. Stop wasting my time, Silas. You have to fight Lana. Or see what happens when you break your first big contract."

The noise in the studio, the music and stomping and goading cheers, seemed to encircle him like something solid, like the audience's demands formed an electrified cage and any wrong move would get him zapped. As a child, Silas had always panicked just as much at the prospect of being buried in sand or trapped in a cave as at the idea of being mocked or embarrassed in front of his peers. He wasn't thinking of this tendency as he stared at the green curve between Lana's lips, but the swooping dread and manic certainty that something horribly unfair was about to happen and he had to stop it were similar – if anything they were magnified by adulthood and the sheer number of observers. A moment passed where the din was so great it seemed like silence. Then something in Silas' machinery clicked on, and he moved. Everything moved. The whole room was accelerating in towards Lana's smile, like stars into a black hole.

Including his fist. Before he knew what he was doing, Silas had punched Lana three times, cutting her face and knocking her to the ground. He'd known Lana was in good shape, but she really was surprisingly tough: once she realized what was happening, she fought back. Even after three blows to the face, she managed to give him a good kick to the knee and a flailing box to his left ear. But he had the advantage: he was on top of her, and more importantly, he was bigger, stronger. And wasn't that the only truth of violence - that a real fight was never fair?

The referee grabbed him by the shoulders, but he threw her back, still holding Lana's wrists above her head in a way that was familiar but foreign, rage instead of passion, her body writhing and whimpering beneath him. Slim, strong arms wrapped around him and wrenched Silas away. He struggled wildly, throwing his head back in an attempt to break his captor's nose, but Silas' subduer, Olympian Hilary Oster, managed

to dodge and maintain her grip. He was vaguely aware of people shouting and moving about, of a general commotion. Among the gasps and screams, he registered that some of the noise was not shock and horror but laughter, even cheering. The standby medics, having proper work for a second time in four months, lifted a shaky, blood-covered Lana out of the ring. When Silas took in Lana's swollen, sobbing face, the reality of his actions sank in, and he flailed against Hilary like his body was trying to physically rewind.

"Oh fuck, oh no," he moaned. His stomach hurt all over, like he'd swallowed a puffer fish that had just inflated. "I'm sorry, I'm sorry, oh my god oh my god I'm sorry." His legs gave out, and he slumped against the woman who was now trying to release him to the security guards, but Silas clung to her with the same intensity that she had used to restrain him, as if she had the power to save as well as stop him. Eventually the guards pried him off of her, and Silas was led away. A few drops of Lana's blood stained his white button up shirt.

Later, in the green room, Miranda showed him footage of the attack on her laptop. He saw the sickening grimace he had worn as he beat Lana's lovely face until he couldn't see the fear on it anymore. Another camera panned the crowd, most of whom looked thunderstruck or horrified. A few, mostly college-aged boys, were delighted, whooping and pumping their fists.

"This is going to be tricky," said Miranda, looking almost pleased at the challenge. "But if we edit it right and wait to air until the media's played with the story a bit, put the incident in context of the break-up, the fact that Lana's already a love-her-or-hate-her type, I think the response will be mixed enough that we can keep you on. That was a stupid stunt you pulled, but we may be able to use it in our favor."

Silas was silent, eyes not leaving the computer screen as Lana was hauled away, looking small and pitiful as road kill. He watched himself reach an arm out towards his battered ex-girlfriend, the other still clutching Hilary Oster. He didn't remember this gesture, but it was exactly what he felt like doing now, to grab hold of Lana and

apologize and hide her broken face from the cameras and judging eyes. He didn't know if she'd even speak to him again, or how she was doing, or what he was going to do now that the cause of her injuries was part of who he was. Every attempt at thought made him very tired.

"Don't worry," Miranda said as she closed her laptop and stood to leave. "She signed a release, so legally you're fine. Everything else is opinion." Her hand resting on his arm was hard and firm as a shackle.

One thing was clear to Silas as Miranda left, which was that he'd answered the question that Tough Love had been skirting around since its conception, the question that had always nettled him even though he hadn't been able to articulate it before now: How hard exactly can a man hit a woman?

The answer was a simple one, the same as it had always been, the same as it was in fights between men: just as hard as he can.

Love Sonnet

As killers tend to know the ones they kill,
It's us, not others, whom we need to fear.
A selfish love, a high psychotic thrill,
Turns organs into ornaments, my dear.
But none of us are earthquakes – our faults signs
Destruction waits beneath a shallow crust.
Humanity's a dance floor spiked with mines:
You learn the steps, but you're a fool to trust.
Yet even the most rotten, callous soul,
Who'd slaughter half the world without remorse,
Has needs and longings out of her control,
And joy and comfort have to have a source.
What signifies how safe we both shall be?
Not who you are, but who you are to me.

Conditional

You can be anything you like, she says.
Except a ballerina.

I want to be a rocket scientist,
a neurosurgeon, a writer, a method actress.

I want to herd goats in New Zealand,
I want to live in a van and understand homelessness.

She is fine with this.

I say, The world is coming to an end
and the next pope will be the Antichrist.

Ok, she says.

I say, I am an atheist. Love is a chemical.
Free will's a myth.

She tells me I'm entitled to my opinions.

What if I just take a few lessons? I ask.
Just for fun?

We could not be friends, she says.

I tell her, I think I'm a lesbian.

That's wonderful, she says.
I love the gays.

I tell her, I might not actually be a lesbian.

She says, No problem. We're still going
to the parade.

She recommends a documentary on asexuality.

I confide that I've never been comfortable in my body.

She promises to be supportive, whatever I choose to do.

My eyes linger on a tutu.

Don't even think about it, she says.
Stop twirling.

Harvest

I left the knife in the pumpkin
stared, imagined I'd stabbed
my grandmother's belly
tried to deny
I'd imagined it

She stood unaware at the kitchen
table, and I loved her
I was seven
It wasn't wanting to so much
as knowing I could
with the same thrust
pierce a different flesh

And so we find autonomy in the handle of a knife

My grandmother carved her
husband, sick with cancer
in his prostate
took her time as he
bled into a bag
paying off her years
of patience, waiting to be cruel

My grandmother did not
watch as her daughter
held her father's hand
and he travelled
back to Germany, leaving
once again for war
and the hard mercy of an enemy
who is at least impersonal

I think he slept with her sister
her older sister who'd say
my grandmother wasn't worth
the salt to bake her bread,
who'd run with boys and drink and marry
seven times while my grandmother served
the poor, loyal to a man she wouldn't touch.

When never grass grew
on the sister's grave
we'd laugh and laugh
except my grandmother
who forgot how her sister
sued the nearby church
and, determined to pierce even dead
hearts with rightness, she'd
fret and frown and bury
her sister again and again
barren dirt and a blanket of dead seed.

Unforsaken

Why do I relax with stripes on my back,
arms tied like yours, breath shallow,
heart crushed to bursting? Was it you

who taught me to chew flesh, to worship
the taste of blood? You god-forsaken God,
how do I escape your boot-faced love, withheld?

I remove your collar; it chokes me harder.
You teach your priests to crawl like serpents,
grind and writhe our prayers into the dirt –

Is it any wonder when we become
perverts? I still crave the wallow of sin,
the self-loathing release of redemption.

We're abominations, unworthy, filthy and
groveling – why then do you bind us, fill us?
We cry your name as you kill us, dead to

ourselves until all that's left is perfect
submission, with no will but yours, the beastly
mark that lasts long after you've been renounced.

Out of Xanadu

Erin would never have accepted Maeven's offer to set her up on a date had the two of them not snuck away from the Missouri Women's Advocacy Group's office Halloween party to drink a pilfered bottle of wine in Erin's cubicle. It was a tiny act of rebellion. But it was enough to form a bond between them – at least when combined with alcohol and the novelty of creeping around the darkened office so far outside work hours. Maeven was costumed as a giant bee, sitting in Erin's chair while Erin, in a plain black dress and a lopsided witch's hat, lounged cross-legged on the desk. They'd both had a few too many and Maeven was regaling Erin with stories from her years as a teenage delinquent.

"We all thought this guy was cool, you know- he gave us weed, he got free cable for this guy's apartment, he was like 35 but we thought we were mature so we didn't care," said Maeven. "But then he just stopped coming around. We'd call him and he wouldn't answer. Eventually we asked a mutual friend and he said it was because I'd turned 18." She leaned forward, her eyes hazy and conspiratorial. "Turns out this guy did that a lot, just hung out with teenaged girls until they became legal adults. I guess that when he was 20 he got a 16 year old pregnant, and she died before having the kid. He was so upset by it that he just sort of got stuck there, couldn't move on and have relationships with adults."

"Holy shit," said Erin, grimacing with sick fascination. She finished off the wine in her plastic cup and poured them both more, emptying the bottle. Erin wasn't a big drinker; the idea of losing inhibitions typically made her anxious. But what had started as a tremendously tedious evening of office small talk and failing to rebuff Jared, the programs coordinator, with curt replies to his boring questions – "Mind if I sit here?" "I don't care." "Have you read any good books lately?" "Why?" "Woo, I don't have much of an alcohol tolerance. Which is weird, since my family's Irish. Where did your family originate?" "Pangaea." – had actually gotten fun when Maeven had come to her rescue with "urgent questions about the website" and whisked her away. Now Erin was having a good time, a rare occurrence of late, and she wanted to drink away the nagging voice that told her to be cautious.

“What about you?” asked Maeven, cocking an eyebrow in a way that would have been more intimidating if she weren’t in a bee costume, her mouth stained purple with wine. “What kind of crazy shit did you get into?”

“I really don’t have any,” said Erin. The most trouble she’d ever been in was for a short story she’d turned into her school’s literary magazine, and that hadn’t even earned her detention. The story was called “Out of Xanadu,” inspired by the Coleridge poem she’d read that year in sophomore English, and it was about a young woman who visits an actual pleasure dome with her fiancé. The dome is a place of total relaxation, where every need is met without the slightest effort and guests are made comfortable with cushions and climate control and tranquilizing drugs. Soon the woman loses track of her fiancé, trusting that he’s safe, that he wouldn’t bring her anywhere that wasn’t safe. After an unknowable stretch of time, the young woman becomes alert enough to notice a strange wiry man beckoning her from inside an air vent. She summons the energy to follow him, and he leads her to a secret lair to tell her the truth of the dome: that guests are being fooled and exploited, that as good as it feels to relax into the dome, doing so is dangerous. He informs her that the dome leeches its energy from its inhabitants, and anyone who stays too long is absorbed. When she asks for proof, he removes his pants, revealing a scarred stub where his penis used to be. He says that he was once part of the dome, but he got free from its power and regained control by castrating himself with a rusty knife, the only thing painful enough that he could wake up and disengage. The man helps her escape, but informs her that it’s too late for her fiancé because he’s fully under the power of the dome, but that this is for the best because the only way to be safe is to be cut off from the things you want and from those who want things from you. The woman spends the rest of her life in isolation.

Inevitably, this story earned Erin a visit to the guidance counselor. She followed the counselor to his office, trembling with dread, not remotely comforted by his assertion that she wasn’t in trouble. “This is upsetting,” he said, leaning forward with his elbows on his desk, his young face a textbook expression of authoritative worry. “Very upsetting. What on earth compelled you to write a story about genital mutilation? Are you having problems in class? At home? Is there anything you want to talk about?” She

avoided his searching eyes and said no, that it was just a story and she was sorry if it was inappropriate for school. “Ok,” he said. He didn’t sound convinced. “I’m still going to have to call your parents.” Erin listened, heart racing, as the counselor explained to her father what had happened, the story’s content and why the school was concerned. “Thank you, yes,” he said into the phone. “I think that would be a good idea. Yes, I can tell Erin’s a good kid. We just want to make sure she’s ok.”

Erin told Maeven about the story and her counselor’s reaction, and Maeven said, “Ugh, asshole, of course that’s what he focused on,” but Erin hadn’t told her the whole story. She left out the part where she went home that night and her father dismissed the incident, saying the counselor and school were oversensitive. That would mean getting into her family, which she’d always found difficult to explain. “They just don’t get people like us,” her father had said, fondly tousling Erin’s hair, which back then was pixie-short and blue. “But really, E,” he continued, his voice more serious. “You shouldn’t keep writing stories like these. You see how people react. If you really want to change things, you need to stick to real ideas. You’re smart. You’ve got opinions. You stick to the problems of the real world, you’ll never run out of stuff to talk about.”

Erin and Maeven finished their wine and stumbled arm in arm down the hallway back to what was left of the party, giggling and shh-ing each other and trying not to bump into things. They paused outside the door of the conference room, which emitted the sounds of party chatter and laughter that sounded canned despite coming from live people. Erin leaned against the wall next to a poster of a beautiful smiling woman in a suit, with the words *Looks can be deceiving: anyone can be the victim of domestic abuse*.

Maeven’s lips moved as she read the poster, snorting when she finished. “Well, I guess a girl has to have goals.”

Erin reached to stroke the poster’s face. “Too bad I’m not prettier,” she said. “I think I would have made someone a wonderful battered wife.”

“Bullshit,” said Maeven with drunken authority. She backed away from Erin and pointed at her. “I have a friend who would think you’re very pretty.”

“Really?” Erin asked. She was pleased if a bit taken aback and in a rare mood where everything sounded like a good idea. A friend of Maeven’s had to be better than the guys who usually showed interest, guys like Jared who seemed to think that because she was quiet that she was shy and nice and easily flattered.

“Yeah. I think you’d get along great. If you’d like to meet him?”

Now, on the morning of the date, Erin sits alone in her parked car, keys in her lap, hands on the steering wheel like she doesn’t believe the car will hold still just because it’s not running. *Here’s how today’s going to go, she thinks. At work, you’re going to think about work. And if you aren’t thinking about work, you’re going to think about your date tonight.* Her eyes clench shut in annoyance. She leans her forehead forward on the wheel and sighs. *Yes, I know it’s stupid,* she thinks in the same bored, authoritative voice that conducts all of her self-lectures. *But you’re going. You’re not going to talk yourself out of it by being all scared and depressed. And you’re not going to worry all day about trivial shit like you’re a pathetic goddamn child.*

She jerks her head up from the wheel angrily, turning to verify she’s alone in the parking lot, which she is. In previous jobs she’d had managers call her into one-on-one meetings when they noticed strange behavior, their eyes betraying the worry they tried to mask with their open body language and too kind voices. They’d sit her down, and after some small talk designed to make her feel safe and trusting, they would ask all too familiar questions, like “Are you having any difficulties with your assignments?” and “Are you happy working here?” Which really meant: “Are you too crazy to do your job?” and “Are you dangerous?” She’s never been fired, has always managed to smile and give answers that assuaged her bosses’ fears, but after such talks, she always soon found it necessary to move on.

Erin exits her car, hunching her thin body and frowning against a fierce wind that cuts through her clothes. It’s November – a dead grey month, cold and blustery with no snow banks to block the brutal gusts. She hurries across the lot towards the office door, her gloveless hands tight fists in her coat pockets, chapped knuckles cracked near the

point of bleeding. The large old building hosts several organizations, and Erin's destination is the fourth floor, the current home of the Missouri Women's Advocacy Group where she works as a grant writer. Just a few weeks earlier, she'd told Maeven, the IT director and the closest thing she has to a friend in the office, that she'd wanted a job where she could help people – she just didn't want to have to interact with them.

Inside, she takes the stairs as always, not allowing herself to slow down as she climbs. By the third flight she no longer feels cold but nauseatingly warm, sweating a little under her pea coat. She never lets herself use the elevator; if she did, she'd receive the same internal reprimand of laziness that forces her out of bed before eight even on weekends, pushes her to run that extra mile when her legs are shaking, discourages her from taking sick days no matter how ill she is. The voice in her head isn't quite her father's, though she often remembers his admonishments – 'push through, it's only pain, dammit Erin you need to toughen up' – and his unwavering disdain for self-pity. Her mother had left soon after Erin's little brother, Chris, was born, and Erin grew up believing and echoing her father's curses, his stories of how well her mother was treated, how little she appreciated it. "I'm sorry I didn't live up to all of her romantic fantasies," he would say. "I'm not some Prince Charming who swept her off her feet and made sure she'd never wash another dish. Your mother left because she was selfish. She was spoiled. She never learned how to live in the real world." He was determined that the same could not be said of his children. They were healthy kids but skinny, clean but under-parented. They gave the impression of being over-scrubbed, like a cracked tile floor in an old hospital building. They might smell of bleach if anyone came close enough to get a whiff of them. Their small, suburban house was furnished with haggled thrift store items and filled with the voices of newscasters and pundits for whom Erin's father added his own bombastic commentary. "Just look at how this country's being effeminized. It makes me sick." This was a common dinnertime lecture for Erin and her little brother, Chris, their father gesturing with his fork, the news playing in the background. "We can't even elect real men anymore. Anyone who has any fight in him, who sees what the real problems are, gets booted for not being 'PC,' and now we're being coddled by libs and commies who can't even handle having their *feelings* hurt. I

don't like to think about what state this country will be in when you kids are grown, but I'll be god-damned if you can't take care of yourselves."

When Erin reaches the fourth floor, she's a little dizzy but walks briskly down the hall, eyes on the tile floor to discourage any professional cheeriness that may come from the other office dwellers. She arrives at her cubicle, a cloth-walled box lacking the personal effects and decorations of her coworkers – the comic strips and photographs, the warm colorful touches. Even the everyday paper debris required for her work is stowed away from sight, her appliances carefully dusted. She's been at MWAG for nearly a year, but no one could guess that from the austerity of her workspace. She hangs her coat on the back of her chair, drops her purse on the floor, sits, and immediately opens her laptop.

Her inbox contains a few new e-mails, mostly junk and things she was CC'd on for no sane reason. She opens one from Justine in marketing, with the subject "Cycle Break-Out's Great Success." Cycle Break-Out was an educational conference they organized for the last weekend in October in honor of Domestic Violence Awareness Month. Erin wrote the grant application that got MWAG the funding. She reads: "Hi everyone! I just wanted to thank you all for the hard work you put into making Cycle Break-Out such a great success. I personally learned a lot, met some awesome people, and had a blast! We had great attendance at all of our workshops and panels, and the Un-maskerade Ball that closed out the weekend was a perfect opportunity to wind down and socialize before heading home-"

Erin stops, unable to make herself read about all the ways MWAG will devote time and money to events that promise help to victims but in fact provide no relief at all. It's infuriating in a way that's almost embarrassing, like she's not only been betrayed but made complicit in her own betrayal. She deletes the e-mail and moves on.

The last one is from Maeven. The subject line is blank, but there's no question what it's about. Erin nervously pulls at the ends of her chin length blonde hair, taking a few deep breaths and trying to ignore the bile taste at the back of her mouth. When she opens it, the e-mail is surprisingly short and painless: "Erin – Just checking to make sure

you're still on for meeting Abbott tonight. Please do. He's super nice and he's looking forward to meeting you. Like I said, it's casual. If you are going to back out, call or text him at least a little ahead of time, or tell me at the meeting this afternoon and I'll do it for you. But really, just go. YOU NEED TO HAVE SOME FUN. – M"

Erin slumps in her chair, a little insulted by Maeven's assumption that she might bail at the last minute, even as comforting images of herself at home eating bagged pasta and surfing the internet flash through her mind. The date's a challenge now, something she's going to do whether she wants to or not. Yet despite the promise she made in her car, she doesn't want to think about tonight at all. She can't, really. For the past couple of weeks, ever since she agreed to meet Abbott, Erin has played out every conceivable negative scenario: *What if he sees me and is too polite to leave but clearly wants to, and I have to sit the whole evening in awkward silence with a man who's clearly disappointed by me? What if I drink too much, and he's charming in all the right ways, and I go home with him and he puts naked pictures of me on the internet with mocking captions? What if he's a serial killer and Maeven's just helping him scout out sad skeletal blonde girls no one will miss?*

She forces herself to resist thoughts that might convince her that the whole endeavor's pointless and risky and she should just stay home, but when she tries to visualize the evening going well – even in just a friendly way – she draws a blank, and that blank scares her more than her most cynical imaginings.

Erin opens a grant proposal she's been working on to try to fund a date rape prevention program for high school students. She's not enthusiastic about the program, which focuses mostly on teaching girls how to avoid rape-friendly situations and behaviors, but she has to admit it's better than her school's silence on the topic, not to mention her hometown's attitude that it was a boy's job to try and a girl's job to say no. Her father said nothing but expressed his concern by giving her pepper spray and teaching her how to hit. Neither option was ever put to use; Erin had been a bullied youth and a suspicious and reclusive teenager. Long before puberty she'd learned to

loathe and fear the lack of self-awareness that got other kids duped and shamed. Trusting too much had never been one of Erin's problems. She never understood the optimism of naïve or unpopular girls who were asked out by older guys, how they could hold on for so long to the hope that they were secretly desirable or beloved, how they'd walk into obvious traps then cry when they sprang. Erin never wanted to feel that foolish, that defenseless. She'd overhear the hushed gossip of classmates as they retold with eager disgust stories of girls who'd performed sexual favors under the influence of alcohol, or peer pressure, or promises of love, only to be publicly humiliated. She'd feel bad, yet she could never stop herself from thinking, *That stupid, stupid girl.*

Erin edits the proposal, shamelessly highlighting the aspects of the program that best meet grant requirements and omitting the rest. She double-checks the budget and references, ensures the cover letter is sufficiently obsequious without being sickening, then sends it to her supervisor for review. Her job requires a degree of deceptiveness, but she's decided that it's not the destructive kind: being convincing is part of the agreed upon rules of the money game. If she really believed that other organizations had projects more worthy and effective than hers that weren't being funded because of her efforts, then Erin might feel guilty. Instead, she felt like one more spinning cog in a wildly inefficient machine. She could take some pleasure in the craft of her writing even if the payoff to the community would likely be negligible.

According to the clock on her computer, it's nearly one. The staff meeting's at one thirty, so Erin decides to take her lunch break. She always remains at her desk for lunch, eating a granola bar and a bag of baby carrots as she reads news articles online.

"Hey Erin, how's it going?" Erin startles at the voice behind her, halfway through her third article – an expose on AphroDIETe, a diet plan for 'empowered' women that on examination is tremendously unhealthy – and closes her browser in a rush of panic. She turns to see Justine from marketing standing in the opening of her cube. Justine wears a huge grin that barely seems to shift when she speaks, framed by red lipstick to match her scarf and shoes. "You about ready to head over to the meeting?"

"Oh," Erin says, glancing at the clock. "Yeah. I'll be right there."

“Well, actually,” Justine draws out the syllables, scrunches her face in cutesy apology. “We really need to go now if we’re going to be on time. Don’t think no one’s noticed how you keep sneaking in the back ten minutes late! Come on. If we’re on time, we can get the comfy chairs.”

“Fine.” Erin picks up her purse and grudgingly follows Justine down the hall, not even trying to disguise her displeasure. Justine’s the kind of woman who thinks advocacy is most effective when it’s pink and sparkly, who tries to make breast cancer fun. Erin has the impression that Justine talks to her out of either charity or spite, since no amount of rudeness will make her stop.

“So, I heard you have a date with Maeven’s friend Abbott.”

Erin closes her eyes and exhales, forcing patience as irritation rumbles through her abdomen. “Yeah,” she replies, wishing the meeting room weren’t on the other side of the building.

“That’s so cool. He’s adorable. And super sweet. I met him at Maeven’s barbeque last summer. I’m sure she told you he works for Kids First?”

“Yeah,” she says again. “I’m going to run to the restroom before the meeting starts. Go on ahead and get a good seat.” Without waiting for a reply, Erin ducks into the women’s restroom. It’s empty, but she doesn’t trust Justine not to follow her, so she locks herself in a stall. For one weak moment, she wishes she still had someone to call when the world seemed orchestrated to make her feel like shit, a place to go for comfort that was better than being home, alone. *Don’t be ridiculous.* She releases a frustrated sigh, shaking fond selective memories out of her head. *It’s better now. You’re better on your own.*

When Erin was seven, her father took her and Chris, then five, to visit the Museum of Torture Devices. It was a low-budget operation that shared space with an antiques store and a place that sold bail bonds. The entry room looked like a messy den, with a couch and chairs and garage sale-style decorations. Next to the door there was a

desk, where sat the proprietor, an older woman with long salt and pepper hair and a bohemian style dress who was reading People magazine when they came in. There were no other visitors. She smiled warmly, eager to welcome what were probably her first guests in many days, but paused, her black eyebrows raised in concern, when she noticed the ages of the children.

“This museum isn’t really meant for kids this young,” she said. “The displays aren’t graphic, but they aren’t exactly family friendly. I did the research myself, so it’s historically accurate. I don’t think they’ll like it much.”

Erin’s father shook his head. “Don’t worry about these guys,” he said, patting Chris on the back. “They’re tougher than they look.”

The woman seemed skeptical, but she accepted their admission fees and directed them towards a gap in the black plywood partitions that separated the front from the exhibits. The torture devices were replicas, displayed in glass cases with descriptions printed next to them on white computer paper. To better show how the torture implements worked, some were used on plastic versions of whatever body part they were meant to harm. Chris was too young to read and stayed close to their father, who gleefully explained the workings and purpose of each device. Erin stayed nearby, but she was a strong reader, already two grade levels ahead, and could explore a bit on her own. She listened as her father narrated the workings of foot presses and thumb screws, tongue tearers and the “Bride’s Scold,” which was basically a chastity belt for the face with a spiked metal bit to silence “witches, nags and scolds.”

“Well, I guess that’s one way to do it,” he quipped. “Look at this one, Chris.” He pointed to the next device, a plastic skull stuck under a metal cap attached to a larger screw. “It says this thing is a head crusher.” He read aloud how the torturer would place the victim’s head in the device, then turn the screw to gradually compress the skull. First the teeth would break, then the eyes would pop out. Sometimes the skull would break and the brain would ooze out between the cracks.

“Cool!” said Chris, with the delighted disgust of a child who didn’t yet fear death. His eyes were wide and roving to take everything in.

“Oh really? See how you like it.” He playfully put a hand under Chris’ chin and one on top of his head, pressing lightly to mimic the device, which caused Chris to emit a joyful shriek that made Erin want to hit him. She was a few steps ahead, slowly reading a sheet of paper on the psychological effects of torture. She didn’t know the word *psychological*, but she understood enough of the rest to guess from context that it had something to do with the brain. The sign read: “Those who survived the physical torture often suffered severe psychological distress. Some became inflicted with severe paranoia, having a constant fear of their tormentors following, hunting them down, and inflicting more pain on them.” She shivered and apprehensively checked behind her. Of course, no one was following her, just her father and Chris.

“Hey!” Her father’s voice boomed through the silence of the near-empty museum, making Erin jump. His tone was the same as when she was in trouble, but as he walked over, Chris in tow, he looked amused. “Don’t wander off on your own. Come on over this way. I want to show you something neat.” He held out his hand, and although she had seen more than enough, she silently let him lead her to the back wall where some of the larger displays were hung. He stopped in front of a long, two-handled saw like the ones Erin had seen in cartoons of lumberjacks cutting down trees.

“Well?” he asked, beaming down at her. He looked so excited, mischievous even. Erin didn’t want to disappoint him.

“It’s a saw,” she said. Of all the devices, the saw filled Erin with the most fear, the greatest desire to flee. Normally, when Erin was out in her father’s garage playing with his tools, the serrated edge of a saw would remind her of dog’s teeth or tiny ocean waves. They were sharp, but they were hardly threatening. Here, among such horrors, the sight of all those familiar little points made her sick. “They used to saw people?”

“Yeah, but that’s not the interesting part.” He showed her an illustration underneath the saw of a naked woman, upside down, tied by the ankles to a bar, with two men holding a saw, prepared to cut her in two. “You know why they held them upside down?” Erin shook her head. She didn’t want to know, but she knew there was no interrupting her father’s lessons. “It made the blood rush to the head. Of course sawing

someone in half makes them bleed a lot, and the executioners wanted to make sure the criminals stayed conscious as long as possible. Holding them upside down kept enough blood in the brain to keep them alive, sometimes until the saw reached the heart. Isn't that clever?"

Erin winced, her arms crossed, barely holding back tears. "Dad, I don't like this place," she said, struggling to keep her voice steady. "I want to go home."

"Hey, don't you start whining," he admonished, a mischievous idea forming behind his eyes. "Little girls that whine get sawed in half!" He lifted her up by the waist, laughing gleefully, and with a swift motion flipped her upside down, holding her by the ankles. Her father rough-housed with them all the time, but when the huge saw spun before her eyes, the terror snapped inside her and Erin lost control, screaming "No!" and flailing, struggling to be free of her father's grasp.

"Woah, hey, stop it!" He gripped her ankles harder, holding her tight to keep her from falling on her head. "Calm down. I got you." He turned her upright and wrapped her into a bear hug, still not letting her touch the ground. Erin was a girl who rarely cried, especially in front of people, but even as Chris stared and shame prickled through her body, she couldn't stop the onslaught of rattled sobs. She returned her father's hug, clung tightly to his shirt and buried her wet, red face into his shoulder.

"E, shh. I'm sorry," he said, rubbing circles on her back. "I shouldn't have scared you. But if you don't quiet down now, you're gonna get us thrown out of here."

Just then, the proprietor stepped through the gap in the partition and asked if everything was all right. "I warned you this museum isn't meant for children," she said, frowning sternly at Erin's father.

"Yeah, I think we're heading out." He smiled and affectionately jostled Erin in his arms. "Seems like this one got a little spooked. She'll be ok in a minute."

Her father carried her out of the museum, all the way out to the car, the rhythm of his gait lulling her into a sleepy post-cry stupor. He helped Erin and Chris into the back seat of their sedan, buckled them in. Before he started the car, he turned around in the

driver's seat and gave Erin a very serious look. "You know you don't have anything to be scared of, E. Those things you saw, they were used to punish bad people, to stop them from doing bad things. If people do what they're supposed to do, they don't have to worry. Besides," he concluded, turning to face forward, "if anybody ever tries to hurt you, Chris and I will be there to protect you. No matter what."

Protection was a promise her father frequently made, and Erin believed it. Even when it was he who made her feel bad, which was often, he'd also be the one to rub her back and let her blow her nose on his sleeve. He said that he'd do anything for his kids, that if someone broke into his house he'd be hesitant to kill to save his own life, but he'd kill for them in a heartbeat. Erin's worry was never that her father would abandon or harm her, but that he'd think poorly of her. As they drove off, it didn't even occur to her to be angry at her father for scaring her; she was too angry at herself for getting scared and getting them thrown out. The museum was supposed to be a fun, grown-up treat, and Erin had ruined it by acting like a little kid. Worse was that Chris, young as he was, had seemed to enjoy it, while she couldn't look at a device without imagining the prisoners' cries of pain and fear, heard only by the men who turned the screws tighter.

The meeting stretches on with the sort of distracting tedium that is impossible to focus on or fully ignore. There's a burning sensation behind Erin's eyes, her minutes are covered in doodled shapes, and she slowly realizes that she's slouched at a strange angle and has been gnawing on one of her fingers, as if chewing off a body part could free her from boredom. She scans the room to see if anyone's noticed how unprofessional she's being, if they care, but no one seems to be looking at her. Justine's sitting up straight in one of the comfortable chairs at the front, nodding attentively and taking notes. Erin looks at Maeven across the table and shoots her a friendly eye-roll of shared annoyance. Maeven responds with an encouraging smile and tilts her head towards the clock on the wall, which Erin miserably realizes reads four o'clock. There's only three hours before she's scheduled to meet Abbott. For the first time, she dreads the end of a meeting.

At exactly seven, Erin arrives at Village Thai Restaurant, a hole in the wall about a ten minute walk from her apartment. She makes herself walk, despite the cold, and stands shivering just inside the doorway while she waits for Abbott. Under her coat she wears jeans and a sweater, wanting to look nice but not like she's trying to be attractive, which she feels would be hopeless. Sometimes she looks at herself and thinks all that's changed since puberty is that she's dried out, withered without ever ripening. For makeup, she has on a small amount of concealer to cover her blemishes and to mask the dark circles under her eyes. She'd tried some lip gloss, but it was shimmery and made her feel ridiculous, so she wiped it off.

After a few minutes, a young man enters and Erin flinches, recognizing Abbott from the photo Maeven showed her: a good looking guy, about 5'8" with light olive skin, a little husky in a way that makes him seem robust rather than chubby. Only now, he's wearing earmuffs and a huge winter coat that would seem more appropriate in czarist Russia.

"Hey, are you Erin?" he asks, approaching her with an automatic ease she finds alarming. Erin has to force herself not to recoil from his handshake or shoot him a wary, reprimanding look. Part of her has already decided that she doesn't like him. *Stop that*, she thinks. *It's fine. Don't make him feel bad for talking to you.*

The server leads them to their table on the other side of the small dining area, away from the three or four other occupied tables, and takes their drink order, green tea for Abbot and water for Erin. They remove their winter gear, hanging their coats on the backs of the two extra chairs.

"Man, it is just frigid out there today, isn't it?" he says, energetically rubbing his hands together.

"Yes," she replies. "It's bad."

"Days like this I really miss living in Austin. My brother tells me it's like 75 there right now. Makes me wanna smack him. You from around here originally?"

“I grew up a couple of hours away,” she says, without inflection. She hates small talk, not only because it’s boring, but because it leads to discussion of family, which for Erin has always entailed the need to be evasive or the risk of coming off as a pitiable freak. She’s here, she thinks, not out of romantic hope, but to test how long she can pull off being normal. “The weather was the same there.”

She lifts her menu, a little higher than necessary, almost like she’s using it as a shield. The server returns after a couple of minutes with their drinks and asks if they’re ready to order, if they understand the spice levels. Menu items are marked with little flames, zero to four depending on how hot the dish is. Abbott orders pad thai with two flames; Erin gets a four-flamed green curry.

Abbott looks impressed. “Damn girl, you’re showing me up,” he says with a flirty half-grin.

“No,” Erin says, turning her face away from him, eyes focused on the corner of the table. She doesn’t say that she likes to eat spicy food when she’s nervous, that the pain helps her focus, calms her down. “I just have really weak taste buds.”

“Oh.”

Abbott opens the pack of honey the server brought with his tea, squeezes about half into his cup, then takes a drink without stirring. Under the table, Erin fiddles with the sleeves of her sweater, stretching them out to cover her hands.

“So what got you into this women’s rights stuff?” he asks. “There’s gotta be a story there.”

“Not really.” She cringes inwardly at how rude she sounds, how with that tone she might as well have added *idiot*. “I mean, not everyone has some fucked up past. I just needed a job.” She can tell from his face that he thinks she’s a bitch. “I like it, though.” She pushes forward, forcing brightness into her voice and smiling in a way she hopes looks human. “Grant writing’s not my dream, or anything, but it’s a great environment. I mean, Maeven’s great.” She pauses, bites her lip. “What about you? What made you want to work with kids?”

"Oh, you know," he says. His initial friendly ease has diminished. "Got my degree in elementary ed, but I didn't really like teaching all that much. Thought I'd give back to the community."

"So, what, you didn't have classroom experience before you got your degree?" she asks, a bit too aggressively, like she's interrogating him and found a hole in his alibi.

"I did," he says. "It wasn't instructing classes that got me so much as the politics. You don't deal with quite as much of that student teaching. I thought I'd get used to it." He sips his tea. "Or, maybe I'm a bit slow."

Here, the conversation dies. Erin drinks her water, then when it's empty she concentrates on swirling the ice with her straw. When the server arrives with their food, Abbott nods politely, thanks him. Erin has the urge to leave without eating, to pretend she's sick, to drop a twenty on the table and run home where she could hide under a blanket and pretend the whole thing never happened. The next day, she could tell Maeven that he was nice but not her type. Instead, she unwraps her fork from her napkin and begins to eat.

"So," he says after an unnaturally long, silent stretch of chewing. "Have you seen any good movies lately?"

"I don't watch a lot of movies." Erin grimaces apologetically, the sauce from her curry stinging her lips. "Sorry."

Abbott chuckles, shakes his head. "We don't have anything in common, do we?" he states, but in a good natured way. He's acknowledging the obvious, not placing blame.

"We really don't," Erin says, giving him her first genuine smile of the night. She feels like a marionette whose strings have been cut. "Should we just...?"

"No, might as well eat," he says. "And if the date's over, I can stop trying to impress you." As if to demonstrate, he slurps one of his pad thai noodles into his mouth.

"So tell me, Erin," he says, then swallows. "Be honest. What do you really think about MWAG? The way Maeven tells it, you're one of the only other competent people there and you openly hate everybody."

Erin can feel herself blush. "She said that?"

"Yeah, she thinks it's hilarious. And the way you've been glaring at me, I think I see what she means."

So Erin starts in on criticizing some of the most useless programs, then as she warms up and Abbott seems interested she makes fun of Justine and other coworkers who just don't seem to get the point. "It seems to be less an organization that advocates for women who need it and more one that advocates for women's advocates. So much effort gets put into making sure donors know how important they are and how much good they're doing that it starts to cut into our resources. I know it's not a scam, but it feels like one sometimes."

"I know exactly what you mean," says Abbott. "Some of the people at Kids First are so into 'yay, children, they're so happy and beautiful,' it's like they forget that the children we're most concerned with probably aren't."

"And so they become part of the 'pretend everything's fine' machine."

"You know, I sort of get it, though." He leans forward, arms crossed on the table behind his empty plate. "Organizations need money, so they have to get people to pay attention. Smaller problems are easier to fix, don't bum people out too much. People like progress. If they see some, they're more likely to drop in a few bucks." He picks up his fork, draws patterns in the brown sauce. "People don't like to think about pain. You find someone who does, my thinking is they've usually been through something."

They keep talking until they're the only ones left in the restaurant, and without Erin really knowing how they got there, they're soon swapping bad childhood stories, cracking jokes about their distant fathers and screwed up siblings.

“ – so I’d be hitting Chris, over and over, so of course he told on me, but our dad’s brilliant solution was to tell him not to take that treatment from a girl, and that we needed to work through our problems on our own.”

“That’s ridiculous. Did he expect you to write up a treaty, or just battle to the death?”

“Right? That’s not even the worst part. When Chris got bigger, I started to get worried he’d fight back, so sometimes when he was asleep I’d sneak into his room and just stand over him with a butcher knife.”

Abbott cracks up, throws himself back in his chair and slaps his forehead. “What? No. You did not do that.”

“I did!” Erin hears what she’s saying, what she’s jubilantly confessing, and feels the need to clarify. “I wasn’t going to hurt him,” she says, her old familiar guilt and caution returning. “It was just a dumb sibling thing.”

“Oh, obviously,” Abbott said, dismissing the thought with a wave. “Kids do that shit. They’re wild. When I was young, my brother and I were merciless. We had this one game that was just throwing rocks at each other until one of us bled. You see this?” He lifts the hair on his brow and points to a faded scar. “He hit me with a tire iron because I wouldn’t tell him where I hid his bike. Had to get six stitches. Our dad beat us both for that.”

Their server comes by and tells them that he’s getting ready to close up, so they pay their separate bills, put on their coats and walk to the door, where they pause to say goodbye.

“It was really nice meeting you, Erin.” Abbott glances down and lets out a little nervous laugh, the kind that concedes to awkwardness without succumbing to it. He looks small and almost childlike in his silly coat. “Too bad we couldn’t get along when it was actually a date. Not sure how that would work if we saw each other again.”

To her surprise, Erin feels a sting at his words, like the precursor to tears, and realizes shamefully that some unexamined part of her had hoped, from Maeven's first mentioning, that somehow meeting Abbott would go well, really well, and they would see each other again, many times even. Before she'd even known his name, a part of her had hoped that they would date and fall in love and she wouldn't be alone anymore. Her stomach dips at the worry that these stupid, romantic hopes had shown on her face, that she may have done something to indicate that she wanted more from him, or more embarrassingly, that she thought he wanted more from her.

"Yeah, I guess this is it," she says, perhaps too quickly. Erin tries to smile at him without meeting his eyes, then gives a little wave and opens the door to the cold. "But it was nice meeting you, too." She hurries outside, barely hearing Abbott's confused sounding, "Oh. Well, goodnight, then."

As she starts home, Erin feels warm in spite of the night chill, torn open, like a baking apple that swells and busts its skin, the hot sweet juice dripping out. She tries to focus on the positive aspects of the evening instead of her disgraceful disappointment, reminding herself that, while the night didn't fulfill any of her childish fantasies, it wasn't a disaster, either. She'd survived it, which was her main goal – more than that, she'd enjoyed it, and she's pretty sure she didn't embarrass herself too badly. She replays the evening in her head, checking for mistakes, highlighting things she said that sounded stupid, or whiny, or like she was showing off, repeating them over and over until they've changed the whole tone of her memory. *Why the hell did you tell him about our family?* she thinks, *the voice in her head angrier than usual. You have nothing to complain about. You've never had anything to complain about. You're fine.*

Her head pounds and, feeling the hot burble of poorly digested curry in her gut, she stops by the side of the road at the edge of someone's yard and sits down in the cold grey-green grass. Inside the fence she can see a child's swingset, and she remembers her father taking her and Chris to the park, pushing them on the swings until he'd complain his arms ached. But he's out of her life now, Chris too; she's left alone to protect herself with instincts she has no reason to trust, to work through a past she doesn't understand. Which is fine. It has to be fine. Need for others is a weakness she can't afford. It

renders all other defenses useless; it can make a person literally beg to be taken advantage of. Erin feels the urge to vomit but holds it in, keeping the burn of stomach acid down behind her heart. She imagines cutting that heart out and tearing it apart in a public place, to prove that there's only blood in it, that she'll make whatever sacrifices necessary to be safe, that no one else can hurt her like she can. That she doesn't need anyone, even for that.